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DUNCAN, THE SEA-DIVER; or, The Coast Vultures.

BY GEORGE ST. GEORGE.



LIKE TIGERS OF THE JUNGLE, CREEPING UPON THEIR PREY, THE VULTURES ADVANCED.

Duncan, the Sea-Diver;

OR,
THE COAST VULTURES.

BY GEORGE ST. GEORGE.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE TEXAS.

The night had settled down, black and gloomy.

A few stars glimmered weirdly in the dome of heaven, but it was not long before heavy billows of clouds shut out even their feeble attempt at illumination.

A breeze that came and went by fitful, treacherous turns, shivered the pines, rattling their cones like Spanish castanets, and swaying their branches with a tremulous murmur that was not unlike a mournful requiem for the dead.

Through the forest where the trees grew most dense came the fitful glow of a small camp-fire.

A few feet away from this, and seated upon a log was a single figure—a man.

In face and form he was something beyond the ordinary, and one might go many weeks without meeting his equal.

His figure was lithe yet powerful to a degree that made his muscles appear like bands of steel. Every movement was graceful, every action full of unconscious power.

His face was full-bearded, the hair of head and chin being blonde and curly. From the softness of his beard it was evident that he had seldom used a razor.

The eye was gray, and with a keenness of vision before which many a bold gaze might fall; the mouth, as seen under the heavy mustache, strong in its curves, and back of the lips two even rows of white teeth could be discovered when the man suffered his countenance to relax into a smile, which rarely occurred.

In costume he copied after the Mexican, as was natural in this section of the country.

He wore a handsomely embroidered shirt, and velveteen breeches, slashed and laced below the knee. Around his slender waist was a rich scarf, in which he had thrust several weapons of offense and defense. Leaning against the old log near him was a fine rifle, and close by its muzzle lay his sombrero, carelessly tossed hither when he sat down to enjoy his evening meal, now evidently a thing of the past, to judge from the bones scattered about—bones of a wild duck.

Several times the man started and assumed a listening attitude, and on such occasions his face would light up with eager expectancy, which, however, faded away when he realized that his ears had deceived him.

Sometimes it would be a flurry of the wind that thus drew his attention, and anon it was the distant scream of a panther prowling through the coast forest in search of prey.

An exclamation of impatience finally broke from his lips.

"She does not come. This is the first time she has ever failed me. Surely, Little Texas could not forget the rendezvous where we have so often met. There seems to be a heavy weight upon my spirits to-night. Pray God, nothing has happened to my little sweetheart!"

Too uneasy to remain longer seated, he arose to his full height and stretched his arms above his head.

There was a stronger gust of wind than ordinary just then, and it bore new sounds to his ears—sounds that brought a puzzled expression upon his face.

"Wolves!" he ejaculated. "No, I am wrong; no wolf ever gave note like that. Those are the hounds of the Coast Vultures! Some poor devil is being hunted to his death because his money and valuables are coveted by El Morte and his birds of prey. These cursed Mexican authorities are without a doubt in league with the bandits, for they never raise a hand against them, and the Death Captain rules the coast with an iron hand. Strange that he and I have never met. The Vultures never yet gave me trouble. Possibly they know that I am a desperate man to tackle, and do not believe the game would be worth the candle. Pearl-divers seldom turn out to be rich men, here. The law seizes too large a share of the spoils, and most of what is left belongs to the master. They do not suspect the secret that Duncan carries about with him. The secret contained in the green bottle I found in the shark's belly would make rich men of every soul in the band, but I shall surrender it only with my life. Hark! what was that? The wolf-hounds again, and they bay with disappointment. They are at fault. Good! One man at least has succeeded in eluding the Coast Vultures."

When the wind changed again, and he could no longer hear the sounds to which he had been so intently listening, the man's face once more assumed an anxious expression.

"Why does she not come?" he muttered again and again, as he strode up and down the glade in which his little camp-fire had been started.

The wood had ceased to blaze now, and only a pile of red embers remained, which at a little distance must have gleamed through the darkness of the night like the evil eye of some prehistoric monster.

Suddenly he paused in the midst of his walk.

A sound had caught his trained ear, that held his full attention, and his eyes were turned in the direction from whence it came, and which, it appeared, was in a line with the distant point where he had heard the angry notes of the wolf-hounds hunting for a lost trail.

Some moving object fell upon his vision.

Nearer it came, with a distinguishable, undulating motion.

Was it some hunted and tired animal that had been the game chased by the dogs?

He had known deer when harassed by wolves to seek the camp-fire of the hunters, forced by desperation to seek protection from one enemy by appealing to another.

Duncan's suspicions were aroused, however, and stooping, he drew to him his rifle, which he fondled as though it were an old, tried friend.

Then an exclamation fell from his lips that told of sudden astonishment, not unmingled with alarm.

The advancing form had come within the radius of the firelight, and betrayed the fact that it was no animal, frightened by the notes of the wolf-hounds in the forest that thus sought his camp-fire, but a human being.

"Little Texas!" ejaculated Duncan, "and coming from that direction. My God! girl, has it been you those devils of dogs were after? Speak, my girl. Whom do the wolf-hounds of the Coast Vultures chase to-night?"

The girl advanced toward him, but the springing elasticity that had marked her progress when Duncan first caught sight of her was no longer a feature of her gait; she walked slowly, wearily, panting as might one who had run a long race.

The man caught her little brown hands in one of his, and almost crushed her to his heart.

"Oh, thank Heaven! I reached here before they did," she panted.

"What do you mean, Little Texas? Fear not; you know I will protect you with my life. If those devils have been hunting you with their dogs, I'll make it hot for them."

"It is not that, Duncan; but they seek you to rob you of life. Oh, how I feared that I might come too late. You must not tarry here; they may come at any minute and then all will be lost. Fly, Duncan, while the chance remains."

The girl was unusually excited, but evidently more because of the danger threatening the man she loved than from the recent chase in which she had been an interested party.

She was petite in figure, and beautiful in form and features, the flashing black eyes and olive complexion telling of the Spanish blood that ran in her veins.

Little Texas she was called, because a wandering hunter had brought her from the land of the Rio Grande, but he had never told her parentage, and dying some years back had left the girl alone in the world, known far and wide as Little Texas—the girl who could use a rifle with the best of them.

The Sea-Diver looked at her with surprise and incredulity upon his features as she spoke of danger threatening him from the Vultures of the Pearl Coast. He had known these men long, and was even personally acquainted with several of them, but they had never manifested any desire to do him bodily harm and he was now sorely puzzled to account for the strange words of Little Texas and her still stranger actions.

"Be calm, my girl, and tell me what this means. The Coast Vultures have had many an opportunity in the past to take my life if it was of any object to them. Why should they suddenly become my enemies?"

"I will tell you the story, as much as I know of it, at another time. To do so now would be to waste precious minutes. It is enough to know that at this very moment three members of the Vulture gang are somewhere near, creeping up to murder you as you sleep at your camp-fire."

The Shark-Slayer (or Sea Diver, as he was indifferently called) was quick to act.

His face immediately became set with a stern look and once more he fingered the lock of his rifle nervously.

"Say you so, girl! Then, by my soul, I will teach them a lesson they will not soon forget!"

With a kick of his foot he rolled a small log near the large one. It lay partly in the shadow, and might have been mistaken for a human form lying there. To further enhance this deception, Duncan clapped his sombrero at the end of it, and threw his serape over the body, covering all with his poncho.

"Oh!" burst from the girl, who now comprehended the plot to deceive the would-be assassins. "It is good, Duncan! Now, lose no more time, but hide."

She was unusually nervous, and seeing this, he put his hand upon her head and gently stroked her glossy black hair.

"All in good time, dear girl. Yonder is our

covert. Come," and he led her to a patch of bushes on that side of the camp-fire opposite to the direction from whence she had come.

In another minute both of them had vanished from view among the bushes, which closed after their retreating forms.

Then silence deep and profound rested upon the spot where they had so lately stood. The embers of the camp-fire glowed through the darkness of the night, and occasionally a tiny flame would shoot up as some twig fell into the heart of the red bed of coals.

Still the wind rustled the leaves of the trees and rattled the cones on the pines, whose frondage allowed its passage with a peculiar whirring sound—still the distant scream of the hungry panther was to be heard as he roamed in search of prey, and the deep baying of the wolf-hounds came at intervals with savage vehemence.

Not a sound, not a movement gave token of life at the point where Duncan, the Sea Diver's little fire glowed.

CHAPTER II.

LIKE WOLVES IN THE GRASS.

AH! what was that?

The bushes were parted, and a human face peered out upon the little glade. As seen by the faint light of the fire, it was a dark and evil countenance—the face of a Mexican.

For a dozen seconds the man scanned the scene before him and then withdrew. A minute passed away, and then once more a human face appeared, quickly followed by a lithe body that crawled over the ground much after the manner of a black snake creeping upon its prey.

When he had gone about five feet the Mexican paused, and still resuming his character of a serpent, crested his head and took a survey of the situation.

Apparently well satisfied with the state of affairs, he squirmed half-way around and made a quick beckoning motion with his hand.

Immediately the bushes parted again, and this time gave egress to a couple of figures as like the man already in the glade as two peas in a pod. They advanced much after the same method he had pursued, and in a brief space of time were alongside of him.

Then the three moved forward cautiously, and drew nearer and nearer the log behind which the man they sought to slay seemed to be soundly sleeping, for from their position they could see what was to all appearances his head and a portion of his body.

Like tigers of the jungle, creeping upon their prey, the Vultures advanced.

One of them held a cocked revolver in his hand, while the other two nervously gripped long knives, the blades of which gleamed with an ominous brightness now and then, when the fire leaped into sudden life.

Nearer and nearer they drew.

Still not a sound from the motionless figure beyond the log.

They were now within a few yards of the spot, and one of the men paused as though endeavoring to catch the heavy breathing of the slumberer, but in this he was disappointed, though any suspicion he may have entertained was set at rest by a glance at the sombrero beyond the end of the log.

Forward again they went.

The leading man could now put out his hand and touch the log, so close was he to its side.

The others crept up and all ranged themselves alongside the log, still crouching low, and then at a signal from him who held the ready revolver all arose at once, bending over to get at the victim who they fully believed lay on the other side.

It was a supreme moment.

The firelight was strong enough to disclose the truth to them and the uplifted knives were stayed in their downward plunge.

Hoarse cries and exclamations of alarm broke from the trio of villains when they found how they had been duped, for it flashed upon the brain of each man that some deadly danger menaced them.

Like baffled tigers, cheated of their prey they glared around, but not a sign of life was to be seen save a skulking wolf that crept along the edge of the glade off to the right. Then—from out the bushes there suddenly leaped a jet of flame, and accompanying it came the sharp detonation of a rifle.

One of the guerrillas gave vent to a gurgling cry, and started to run, but seized with a deathly faintness, he spun around and fell heavily to the greensward, a corpse.

Another crack, this time even lighter than the first, and yet just as deadly, for a second man toppled over, his hand, no longer clasping the knife, clutching desperately at his breast where through a ragged hole the life-current was oozing out.

The remaining assassin, with cries of fear and horror turned and fled from the spot, nor was there any effort made to prevent him.

For several minutes he could be heard crashing through the dense undergrowth in his mad flight from the spot that had proven so disastrous to his comrades, but the sounds gradually died away and at last ceased entirely.

Duncan and Little Texas emerged from their place of concealment as soon as the fellow turned to fly.

"Let him go," said the Sea-Diver as he saw his companion make a move as though to draw a revolver, "I do not seek his life, and he can take the news to camp. After this it must be war to the knife between Duncan and the Coast Vultures."

The shark-slayer recovered his sombrero, poncho, and serape, and then prepared to leave the spot, with barely a glance at the two motionless forms upon the ground.

In a few minutes they were walking through the forest in the direction of the coast, and as they went, Little Texas in low tones told the story, the culmination of which had come in the death of the two desperadoes.

"I was passing the old ruin at San Miguel half an hour before dark, when Pedro the dwarf suddenly appeared before me. 'Little Texas,' he said, 'you have always been kind to me when others scowled, and for this Pedro loves you. There are men in the ruins yonder, men with dark faces and still blacker hearts. They are plotting the death of a man you love. Creep in there and hear. This Pedro does because you were kind!'"

"I knew then that it was you he meant, and determined to hear what was going on. I crept into the ruins. There was a group of men there engaged in warm conversation, and to this fact I owed my success in overhearing them."

"Three of the four I knew as members of the Vultures. The other was a stranger who appeared to hate you bitterly, for he handed El Morte a bag of gold, and promised him much more when he had carried out his plans. Then one of the men declared that he knew you were to meet me at the Lone Pine about dark, so three men were sent off to carry out the murderous design of their chief and this mysterious stranger."

"Oh, how my heart throbbed when I saw them glide into the forest, and knew that their real errand was to kill you! To leave my place of concealment was my only thought, so that I might outwit these men of blood by reaching you first."

"In leaving the ruins, however, I was discovered by one of the gang, who attempted to stop me, but I shot and wounded him with my revolver, and then sped away. I could hear shouts and orders in the ruins as I ran, and it was not long before there came the notes of the wolf dogs."

"I thought I was brave, but, Duncan, I shivered when I heard those savage howls and knew the dogs were after me. God knows how I flew through the forest, but it was hopeless. The dogs gained continually, and I knew that long before I could reach Lone Pine, they would overhaul and drag me down."

She paused for a moment, as though living again that period of peril, when death seemed so sure. At last, raising her head again, she continued calmly, all emotion gone.

"Just when I was on the point of giving up and selling my life as dearly as possible, a sudden thought of something you had told me in the past flashed into my mind. I turned to the brook, dashed into it, waded a short distance down-stream, pulled myself up into the branches of a tree, and did not touch ground again until I was thirty yards beyond the bank of the creek. Then I ran on in the direction of Lone Pine, and the rest you know."

"Brave girl," said Duncan, with deep admiration, "you saved my life at the peril of your own. Do not think I can forget it."

"Hush!" cried the girl, hastily; "do not speak of it. My life is yours, and I would give it any day, if the sacrifice was needed, to save you. In the past you have risked much for me, and there is little a poor, nameless girl can do for a strong man. What I have done, has been from a grateful and loving heart."

"I know it, Little Texas. Never did woman possess a heart more true and warm than yours. God bless you! As for these fellows who have so suddenly become my foes, I fear them not. Who this man may be, whose gold endangers my life I have not the remotest idea. There is only one person in the widest world who would care for my death, and it is absurd to believe that person could be here."

As they walked along, he had the girl describe this mysterious stranger as well as possible, but when this had been done it appeared to give him little satisfaction, for he still shook his head in a puzzled way that told the enigma was as far from being solved as ever.

He feared no man, and yet there appeared to be a shadow upon his life that haunted him, at times casting a bleakness upon his spirits. Just now he was wondering whether this attempt upon his life was associated with this mystery of the past.

Little Texas walked by his side, thoughtful, and yet striving, in her way, to dispel the cloud that seemed to be upon his spirits.

Among the pearl-divers Duncan was a man well liked, and at times he had even been a leader, but the band of outlaws known as the Vultures of the Coast, was numerous and powerful,

and now that he had made mortal enemies of them, the future looked dark and gloomy.

He had plans, however, that his girlish companion knew not of, and such a thing as fleeing from the desperado band did not enter into his calculations.

They threaded the mazes of the forest, heading toward the Mexican town on the coast.

CHAPTER III.

EL MORTE, THE MAN OF DEATH.

SAN MIGUEL, at this time, was such a town as can be seen at any day in the interior of Mexico.

Groups of lazy fellows lounged about the corners day and night, men who from their look proclaimed the fact that they only awaited the opportunity to rob and pillage, and that it was only the fear of a speedy retribution that kept them from leading such a life as that of the Coast Vultures, with whom they sympathized to a man.

Dogs of every known species apparently, fought and skulked in the streets; women in bright-hued garments were to be seen, many of them showing Indian blood by their dark skins, and once in a while one might meet a senora or senorita, heavily veiled, out with a *duenna*, taking an airing.

The majority of the male inhabitants of San Miguel, being engaged in the pearl-fisheries, the town during the daytime was often scarce in this commodity.

It was at night that San Miguel shone out in all her glory.

There were no street lamps in this antiquated Mexican town, and here and there upon the wretched streets could be seen a little procession, consisting perhaps of a gentleman, guarded by from two up to a half a dozen armed *peons*, and headed by a man bearing aloft a blazing flambeau.

Sometimes, when two of these queer processions met in some more than ordinarily narrow street, there would be hot words and possibly furious blows exchanged before the right of way could be decided.

If the streets were generally dark, there was at least one thoroughfare where this was not the case. Here lights flashed from a dozen houses and illuminated what seemed from its size and shape to be the grand plaza or public square.

These houses from whence came the source of illumination, were without exception gambling dens, which in Mexico are conducted as openly as tea stores in our republic—indeed, many of them are known to be under the protection of the state, which derives a set revenue from their winnings just as it receives a certain proportion of the valuables found in the depths of the sea among the pearl-fisheries.

To see that the Government is not cheated in this respect, officers are appointed who scrutinize the work, watch the division of the pearl-oysters and carry off the third allotted to the state.

One of these gambling dens upon the grand plaza seemed to be much more pretentious in size than any of its neighbors, and through the open doors men were continually coming and going.

Inside, the scene was one of great power.

The majority of the men present were Mexicans, but here and there the darker-hued Indian could be seen. There were also a few foreigners and several Americans. A variety of costumes could be seen, but as a general thing they wore that suited to the warm climate—the sombrero and national costume of Mexico.

Mingling with the crowd were several officers of the state, in their soldier's uniform, mostly white. When the day was over, they doffed their authority and became as other men. In the gambling-den all men met on a level, and it was a matter of money more than social position that governed them.

Among the scores present in the casino were quite a number of athletic fellows, who were known to be pearl-divers. They could have been singled out by an expert because of a certain free-and-easy movement of the limbs, unusual to men who lounged the day away upon the land, and besides, a daring, resolute expression upon their bronzed faces.

Possibly there were close on a score of these men in the casino, most of them engaged in risking what little wealth they chanced to be possessed of upon the flip of a card or the turn of a die.

The life of a pearl-diver is one that makes brave men bold and daring, for it is full of perilous adventure. Besides the usual dangers of a life beneath the surface of the ocean, encounters are frequent with the monsters of the deep, and unless a man possesses a quick eye and a steady arm, he is very apt to be worsted in such an encounter with the man-eater shark.

It was to be expected, therefore, that among the men who daily went down into the depths to tear loose the pearl-oysters from the rocky beds to which they were attached, not a coward could be found.

The great interest of the night seemed to center in one portion of the room where a pearl-diver butted against fortune with varying success, the sums staked being unusually large.

He was an American, and those against whom

he seemed endeavoring to wage war were two Mexicans, one of whom was a large, heavy man, the other small and lithe, with eyes like those of a badger.

The American had gotten hold of quite a sum of money and he bade fair to break the gambler's bank. Quite a crowd had collected around, and there were sympathizers for both sides although the gamblers appeared to have the majority of friends.

First fortune went this way and then that.

Just back of the leading gambler was a man who seemed to be an American, but his dress was entirely Mexican. He was without doubt in league with the gamblers, for they often consulted him.

The pearl-diver noticed this with uneasiness.

He knew the man, as did many of those in the casino, as El Morte, the captain of the Coast Vultures. The two gamblers were his men, and there were many others of the same ilk present.

About this time there entered one who was not noticed in the general interest which this game for high stakes excited. This man was no other than Duncan, the Diver.

He went quietly about without drawing attention. Dropped a word to this man, and a muttered sentence to that. It might have been noticed that the men to whom he thus spoke, were apparently all of the same class—pearl-divers; also, that each one of them gave him a nod in return, with a peculiar look, and more than once the muttered word:

"Ready!"

There was something brewing, that was evident.

Meanwhile affairs were reaching a focus at the game of high stakes. The diver had begun to lose heavily, and though he knew he was being cheated, yet he felt the cold eye of El Morte fastened upon him with basilisk meaning, and he believed that should he attempt to expostulate, it would be signing his death-warrant.

At last the money was all in the hands of the gamblers, and it looked as though the game must close, but, just at this juncture, the captain of the Coast Vultures showed the reason why he had had such a deep interest in the game.

Pushing the whole pile of gold out upon the table, he bent his regards upon the pearl-diver, and said in a low but perfectly audible tone:

"That against your secret, Senor Warner!"

There was a hidden threat and menace in the words, plainly perceptible to every one, and especially so to the diver who stood there as though entranced by the gleam of those eyes that seemed to pierce him through and through.

He started guiltily, uttered a low cry, and half turned with a great effort as though to rush away from the fatal table with its alluring pile of gold; but El Morte caught him by the shoulder and wheeled him around, at the same time repeating those strange words:

"That pile of gold against your secret, Senor Warner. If you lose and refuse to tell it to me, your life will not be worth that," and the bandit snapped his fingers with a sound not unlike the crack of a muleteer's long whip.

Again the pearl-seeker hesitated. His wish seemed to be that he might get away from the spot, while the glitter of the gold and its musical jingle as the gamblers ran their hands through the pile, added to the tone almost of command, held him chained there.

"Baptiste, deal the cards!"

It was El Morte who thus spoke, and one of the gamblers in obedience to the order commenced to shuffle the cards with a smile upon his yellow face that told very plainly he had his mind made up as to how this deal should come out.

There was a stir among the bystanders; such a stake was not seen every day at the casino.

In the midst of the silence that followed there suddenly rung out a clear voice:

"I forbid you to stake a secret that does not belong to you, John Warner!"

"Who spoke?" cried El Morte, furiously, so that those who were nearest him shrunk back in dismay.

The crowd parted to allow a man to step forward.

"I did!" this person calmly answered.

The guerrilla captain eyed him from head to foot in a contemptuous manner. Evidently they had not met before.

"And who in the fiend's name may you be who thus dares face El Morte and offer obstruction to his wishes?"

"I am known as Duncan, the Sea-Diver, and Shark-Slayer!" returned the man who had lately entered, "and may become the Slayer of Vultures as well."

The chief of the Coast Vultures uttered an oath.

"What! you alive?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," returned the Slayer sarcastically; "you fully believed I must be lying dead in the forest, a victim to the knives of the three Vultures you sent to murder me, but Duncan dies not so easily. The next time you are down that way, El Morte, put the two poor wretches underground—that is, what the wolves have left of them."

"Perdition! you have killed two of my men?" roared the amazed guerrilla, never bearded like this before, and accustomed to ruling wherever he went.

"I shot two dogs that were creeping up to run their knives into me while I lay sleeping, as they supposed, beside my camp-fire. If they belonged to you go and give the carrion burial. As for the secret held by this man it belongs to me, and let any one dare to attempt to wrest it from him at his peril."

El Morte raised a silver whistle to his mouth and blew a sharp note. Instantly the greatest confusion ensued in the casino. Upon every man's mind there flashed the truth that matters which for a long time past had been gradually ripening for a rupture between the pearl-divers and the Coast Vultures, had now reached a climax that could only be wiped out in blood.

Those who had no desire to take part in the fracas, not being deeply interested on either side, made a mad bolt for the doors and windows of the casino, and during the next minute there was seen some wonderful plunges through these means of exit, more than one man being so demoralized as to not even wait to see whether a window in his course were open or not, but plunging through, carrying sash and all with him.

About one-third of those present thus escaped. The confusion was not all confined to them and their expressions of alarm. No sooner did El Morte give that sharp signal than he sprung a dozen feet away from the spot where the Shark-Slayer stood.

His voice was heard above all the din, shouting:

"Vultures! Vultures! gather around El Morte!"

Swarthy-faced men pushed in that direction—men who brandished gleaming knives, which they did not hesitate to use when opposed, and more than one wound was given and received, more than one knife stained with blood during the sixty seconds that elapsed from the time the shrill whistle rung out up to the period when the hostile factions faced each other.

The sea-divers had been warned by Duncan, their leader, of what was about to happen, and gathered around him quickly.

The Slayer had foreseen such a rencontre for some time past, and in secret he had been organizing his men, so that when the crisis came they might be able to handle the Vultures with rough retribution.

Inside of a minute, then, this wonderful change had occurred.

Out of the heterogeneous crowd three separate parties had been evolved—the first, or neutrals, having shot through doors and windows with amazing dexterity—the second, or Vultures, being gathered about the Death Captain on that side of the great room nearest the street—while the third, composed almost wholly of pearl-divers, with one or two leather-clad hunters thrown in, had clustered about the commanding figure of Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, and with ready weapons in their hands prepared to obey his orders.

It was evident at a glance that the guerrillas and their sympathizers far outnumbered the other group, but every one of Duncan's party showed a brave front, being men who had often courted danger, while among the followers of El Morte were many who, though ready enough to thrust a dagger into a traveler's back, had never dared look a brave man in the face.

Still they were desperadoes, heavily armed, and led by one whose name had been a terror for years to the whole country over which he had ruled, by reason of the power back of him, as a petty king might have done, forcing tribute here and taking it by bloodshed there.

Weapons of all kinds flashed in the light of the tallow dips in the center of the room. Here there was a post around which were three large hoops, each of which held a dozen tin sconces, so arranged that candles could be fitted into them. The whole arrangement was raised and lowered by means of a rope, much after the lights around the great pole in a circustent.

Duncan had noticed this. The word had already been passed among his men, and they knew what was coming.

El Morte had fully expected, when he gave that well known signal and the rallying-cry, that the pearl-divers would join in the mad rush for the plaza outside; therefore his surprise was only equalled by his rage when he discovered that for the first time there was shown a decided opposition to his iron rule.

He was on the point of ordering his brawny desperadoes to rush upon the little band opposing them when Duncan suddenly threw up his revolver. With the sharp report was heard a rushing sound—there was a wild flaring of the lights, and then the whole fabric bearing them fell with a crash.

Darkness ensued—a darkness that was full of terrible significance, for it would usher some souls into eternity.

CHAPTER IV.

A BATTLE IN THE DARK.

WHEN darkness thus suddenly fell upon the interior of the casino an ominous silence en-

sued. There had been the clear detonation of Duncan's revolver, the crash of the elaborate candelabrum as it fell to the floor, and all noises within ceased as though by magic.

Outside upon the grand plaza shouts and cries could be heard as the inmates of the other gambling-dens hearing the alarm raised by the neutrals who had made such astonishing time in passing through doors and windows, rushed out and joined in the excited throng.

Had the casino remained lighted, many of them might have rushed in to take part in the *melee*, but when darkness so suddenly fell upon the interior, no one was brave enough to enter when he could not see which side to take.

The two doors leading to the street had been held open by means of blocks of wood. In the hasty exit of the neutrals these blocks had been dislodged, and hence the doors had shut of their own accord, being worked by springs, when the last man had passed over their portals.

Although the silence within lasted only for a small fraction of a minute, it was terribly portentous. Just as a fearful calm often precedes the bursting of the cyclone and the hurricane, so this dread quiet gave warning of what horrors were to follow.

It was broken at last by the voice of El Morte, husky with rage, and yet bearing much of its usual terrible trumpet tones.

"Fire! Mow them down. Let not a dog escape. Fire, fire, my brave boys!"

The words were uttered in the Mexican tongue, but they were familiar to every man there.

Hardly had the last word passed the bearded lips of the guerrilla chief, when there was a flash and a roar. His men had obeyed the order and fired.

That brilliant flash illumined the interior of the casino for a second or two, and what he saw brought an oath to the lips of El Morte.

When the Shark-Slayer's bullet had cut the rope of the triple circle of lights, and their fall brought darkness on the scene, the pearl-divers, to a man sunk down upon the floor.

The policy of this action was manifest, for when the followers of El Morte, obeying their captain's command, sent a volley of leaden missiles in the direction where they had last seen their foes, the bullets, as might be expected, passed over the recumbent divers.

Thus, Duncan and his men avoided a severe loss in the beginning of this desperate battle in the dark.

No sooner had the crash of firearms ceased on the part of their foes than it was taken up by the pearl-divers.

They had one advantage, at least.

While the guerrillas were almost two to one in point of numbers they chanced to have a bad position, for the windows were back of them, and the light from the grand plaza made a background against which their figures were plainly outlined.

There was no necessity for one of Duncan's men to fire at random when such good marks were presented to them, and almost every one of those opening shots from their side brought down its man.

By this time the position was fearful, and the crowd upon the grand plaza swayed to and fro, worked up to a pitch of desperation over the unknown fate of those within the casino.

They could hear the sharp crash of firearms discharged freely, and the muffled, deeper, more significant reports of pistols fired when they were pressed against the body of the victim. Wild yells rung out from the windows of the casino—cries that told of exultant delight or wretched agony, of fierce passions excited to fever heat, of a meeting hand to hand between mortal foes.

At times those outside could even hear the heavy breathing of the struggling combatants, as they wrestled and swayed to and fro, while the sharp percussion of blows told of awful work.

After the exchange of shots the pearl-divers had rushed upon their enemies, whose ranks had been thrown into something like disorder by the crash of bullets.

Words could not picture that scene, for no man of those who took part in the *melee* and lived through it saw any of its details as it was fought in the dark, and when the foes came hand to hand the affair resolved itself into so many aseparate fights.

For possibly five minutes the clamor continued, now dying down and anon swelling to frightful proportions. During this time the work of death had been going on in the casino, so that it had in that brief space of time been transformed from a gambling-hell in to a slaughter-pen where human bodies were hacked and mutilated and souls started upon the road to eternity.

High above the din could be heard at intervals the clear voice of Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, encouraging his men to hold out as the battle was already theirs.

El Morte had also attempted to urge his men on to further exertions, but they were so demoralized by the fatal volley that had been poured into their ranks, and the sudden onset of the enemy, that though many of them fought bravely, they had that feeling in the start

which is akin to fear, and a sure precursor to defeat.

When signs of a panic made themselves felt the Vultures began to cast about for some means of retreat.

El Morte realized that the game was up. There were not enough of his men present to carry the fight, and retreat was the best thing they could do under the circumstances, for to remain longer in this black place engaged in mortal combat with these men who were accustomed to looking danger in the face as though it were a daily acquaintance, was to invite total annihilation.

Bitter as the truth was, the guerrilla chieftain was wise enough to recognize its force; so he gave the signal for the Vultures to withdraw.

They obeyed their leader's signal and went, nor did they "stop upon the order of their going."

Much after the fashion in which the neutrals had made their exit from the casino, only with an added impetus because experience was added to fright in the case of the Vultures, they issued forth, some at the doors and others flying through the windows.

Those outside in the plaza were waiting eagerly.

When they saw the dark forms bursting out of all places of egress they knew the game was up with one side, and cheers began to arise as it was discovered that the defeated party was the Vultures.

The coast league had ruled so powerfully that the people had long since given up all hope of ever being free from them, and the consciousness that now burst upon them, regarding the discomfiture of El Morte and his gang of cut-throats was overpowering.

Whenever a Vulture managed to gain the plaza he was forced to break a way through the people by main strength, for all fear of the guerrillas seemed to have taken flight. There were many present intimately connected with the outlaws, but considering the fury of the populace they did not deem it wise to show their sentiments.

When, however, El Morte himself hove in sight from one of the windows of the casino, fierce yells arose. It seemed as though they were ready to rend the man in pieces, yet he arose, looked calmly about him, and walked off.

The crowd opened a passageway, and though the fierce cries still continued to resound, there was not a man who dared lay a hand upon the famous guerrilla chieftain.

He had gained a name along the coast that inspired men with a healthy fear, and even in the hour of his humiliation one glance from that magnetic eye caused the boldest to quail.

Once or twice El Morte turned half-around, and it was simply amazing to see how the wild chorus of savage yells suddenly dwindled down upon such occasions to almost a whisper. The guerrilla could not fail to note this; he had been accustomed to having these people cringe before him in the past, and their sudden rebellion angered him.

"The mongrel curs," he muttered between his teeth as he turned the second time to see them shrink and hear the hoots and cries almost die away, "the cowards. Like a pack of coyotes they can bark and snap at my heels but when I turn they become silent. Bah! I wouldn't give an *onza* for all your hearts. Wait, El Morte does not mean to let this pass. Before a week you shall weep tears of blood for this night's work, San Miguel."

With this muttered menace between his teeth El Morte strode away, leaving the grand plaza with its lights and the hurrying crowd behind him.

He was soon joined by little squads of his men until there were almost a score around him. Some of these had been in the casino with the guerrilla chieftain, as their wounds or bedraggled appearance testified, while others came from the plaza, having been in other gaming-dens at the time the affair began, and intimidated by the awful darkness from going to the assistance of their comrades.

Once El Morte counted his men, and as a more aggravating series of shouts than any that had yet reached his ear, coming from the scene they had just left, and heralding, no doubt, the appearance of the victorious pearl-divers from the house of death, grated upon his hearing, he seemed debating within himself as to whether it would be a wise policy to turn back and charge upon the exultant mob, fickle as all mobs are, and ready to change their allegiance every day.

Deciding to the contrary, however, the guerrilla captain turned away from the scene and was soon leaving San Miguel behind.

Already in his fertile brain, however, he was scheming for the overthrow of the Sea-Diver.

He recognized in this man one who was ready and willing to lead the masses in an uprising against the rule of the despot. Too long had the citizens of San Miguel been allowed to slumber in peace. The fear they had once entertained for El Morte had in a measure

subsided, and dark plots for making them tremble again at the bare mention of his name filled the breast of the guerrilla chieftain as he fled the town.

It would be a dark hour for San Miguel when her citizens hooted and scoffed at one so powerful as El Morte. They did not suspect his whole strength. Many things connected with him and his league they knew nothing of.

His hatred was especially directed toward Duncan, and he felt that the first blow must be struck in this quarter in order to paralyze the enemy.

With such unscrupulous tools at his command El Morte anticipated little trouble in solving this puzzle.

True, the first attempt to put the Shark-Slayer out of the way had proven a failure, but this had been a deal for gold, and now his own hatred was the impelling force.

There were more ways than one to accomplish a given object, and without delay the guerrilla chieftain set his men to work, so that even before morning dawned the first blow should have been struck and retribution begun.

CHAPTER V.

"BLOOD FOR BLOOD!"

WHEN the Shark-Slayer emerged from the casino he was greeted with furious cheers by the populace, who suddenly awakened to the fact that in this daring man they saw the leader whom a kind fate had sent to redeem them from the thralldom of the yoke they had borne so long.

Yesterday it was all El Morte.

To-day the cry was "Death to the guerrillas!"

Had the tables been reversed in the recent engagement, and El Morte the victor, they would have greeted him with the same noisy welcome that heralded Duncan's appearance, such is the fickle nature of a Mexican mob.

The Sea-Diver was not at all deceived by this noisy acclamation. He knew that although the worthy citizens were no doubt in earnest when they thus applauded, yet on the morrow, should fortune frown upon him, they would in all probability stand just as ready to assist at his hanging.

His first duty was to strike a light in the casino.

Then placing guards at the doors and windows to keep the curious populace out, he proceeded to ascertain what damage had been done during the *melee*.

The battle in the dark had not lasted much over five minutes, but bloody work had been done in that time.

All around blood was to be seen. A dozen forms lay upon the pine floor, some writhing in convulsive agony, others stretched out stark and stiff, their fingers still clutching in death the weapons they had wielded in life.

One man leaned against the wall, faint from loss of blood; another sat with his back against the bar, his head lying forward upon his chest, and upon being moved he fell over with a dull sound that told of death.

There were broken bottles and spilled liquor, tables and chairs upset, and money lying upon the floor, some of the gold-pieces even dabbled with human gore, for so suddenly had the alarm been given that the gamblers had found little opportunity to snatch up their wealth, and in the *melee* it had been scattered broadcast.

Crowds thronged each of the windows and gaped in aghast.

Never had such a sight been seen in San Miguel. One would have little trouble in imagining himself upon a battle-field, and indeed there were a number of affairs in the late war, termed battles by zealous historians, where thousands figured on both sides and the loss was not so severe as in the battle of the casino.

There were seven dead men, two of them pearl-divers, and of the six wounded, three were followers of Duncan. The loss of the Vultures had been more severe, because they had suffered heavily in the beginning of the affair by the fire poured among them by their enemies.

Of course many of their wounded had fled, for such was the alarm and consternation that seized upon them when the signal for retreat was given by El Morte, that they forgot cuts and bruises in the one mad endeavor to escape.

The dead were carried out and laid at one end of the grand plaza, while the wounded were cared for, be they friend or foe, although the latter were guarded.

A great bonfire was lighted in the public square, and the work of organization begun by Duncan.

Now that war to the knife had been declared, there could be no half-way policy. El Morte and his men must be wiped out, or else they would take a speedy and fearful revenge.

Recruits were plenty, but the Shark-Slayer was shrewd enough to see that many of those who offered their services, were secretly friends of the guerrilla chieftain, if not actual members of his gang of cut-throats, and while he accepted some of them, he was careful to place them where they could do little harm in case their

object was to betray the plans of the pearl-divers to the enemy.

The only reason he took them at all, was, because in so doing, he believed he cut down the numbers of the Coast Vultures, with whom actual warfare was soon to begin.

So far, all was well.

Through the remainder of the night, San Miguel was a scene of intense excitement.

Many of those who had formerly openly espoused the cause of El Morte, withdrew from the town, believing that when the morning came, if they were caught, they would be strung up before their doors by the apparently infuriated populace.

In this they showed their wisdom.

Several of them, however, in thus retreating, could not help expressing their spiteful rage, and more than one conflagration drew the attention of the citizens before the morning star paled.

Duncan believed the train was now laid, and the spark applied that was to blow El Morte and his gang heavenward.

Satisfied with his work, he left the town at daybreak, and with two trusty companions, repaired in the direction of the cabins where many of the pearl-divers lived.

There was a little settlement of them a mile or so from San Miguel, and on the coast.

Here day and night could be heard the music of the waves, at times gentle and full of exquisite music, and again wild and stormy as the billows of the ocean beat upon the rocks.

Some of the pearl-divers were men of families, having married Mexican women, so that the little community was much like a village.

Here Little Texas lived under the charge of an old Mexican woman, and she was beloved by all Duncan's friends.

The opal light of early morning was just dispersing the gloom of that dreadful night when the pearl-divers left the town and headed toward the little hamlet among the rocks.

They had been joined by several others so that their number now amounted to half a dozen all told, and laughing and talking of their recent success over the guerrillas of the coast they trudged cheerily along.

Over the mountain-range in the east the gray sky was slowly assuming glowing tints as though some monster conflagration was in progress along the further coast of the great bay, but they knew old Sol was stretching out his mighty arms and painting these fair streaks upon the heavens to herald his coming.

While his comrades were feeling so light-hearted and joked as they strode along, the Shark-Slayer, usually a pleasant companion, seemed moody and taciturn.

A weight oppressed him which he could not account for.

He had assumed the leadership of the pearl-divers in their revolt against the guerrillas, and this brought such responsibility with it that he might well be pardoned for being grave and thoughtful, but there was some other reason for his present oppression, as though some calamity soon to happen cast its shadow before.

They walked along for some little time, and the sky in the east grew more rosy with each passing minute. The tide was going out, and a long sandy stretch of beach looked like a white drive on the edge of the waters.

A few little white sails could be seen.

They were the forerunners of the oyster fleet—boats belonging to men who knew nothing of what had taken place on this eventful night, and were at their drudgery early and bright.

There would be little work of this kind done at this particular point of the pearl coast until the question at issue between the powerful guerrilla league and the people was settled one way or another.

Suddenly those nearest the Shark-Slayer heard him utter an exclamation, while he raised his hand and shaded his eyes as he peered dead ahead.

Doing likewise, they were amazed to see a column of light smoke curling up in the direction of the hamlet. No one had noticed it before, and yet that was no sign that it had not been there, for a slight fog hanging over an arm of the sea in that quarter might have hidden it.

There could be no mistake regarding the fact—it was smoke, and in such a quantity as to portend quite a conflagration.

"Hark!" said Duncan, impressively.

A silence fell upon them; each man came to a halt and stood as though turned into stone, while with head bent to one side he listened eagerly, fearfully.

There came to them then a sound that was not only peculiar, but harrowing. It was like a wail from a score of throats, that rose and fell in a dreadful monotone—the same cry, only fainter and louder by turns.

Its effect upon the little group was startling.

Men turned pale and looked at each other apprehensively, as though some horrible suspicion had flashed into their minds, and, at the same time, rendered them speechless.

Borne by the breeze, that frightful, dirge-like wail came again, this time louder than ever, and mingled with it were loud shouts, coupled with the stirring report of a firearm.

"My God!" cried Duncan, "there is something wrong at the cabins. After me, men, in Heaven's name! Remember the women!"

The words acted like magic upon the divers.

When Duncan started off on a run they were close behind him, and the ground was rapidly passed over, so that they drew nearer and nearer the ridge beyond which came the pillar of smoke.

The sounds they had heard were also much more distinct, and there was such agony in them that the blood fairly boiled in the veins of the men who were bounding to the scene.

As they reached the ridge, the slope beyond was thrown open to their view.

It was a picturesque scene.

A dozen cottages nestled on the side of the ridge, with the great ocean beneath. They were vine-clad cottages and a number of them had neat gardens, filled with vegetables and flowers the year round, for Jack Frost never came to this place with his frozen fingers, to nip and destroy.

Down upon the beach and staked in the little harbor were several dozens of small boats, each with a single mast, in which the divers went out every day to their work.

A small house could also be seen, where the coast-guard was lodged, and piles of oyster-shells here and there attested to the labor that had been performed in the past.

Nets hung over fences, and the little hamlet ordinarily had all the appearance of a fishing-village upon the coast.

The scene was far different now.

Several of the cabins were in ashes, and the smoke issuing from one or two others.

Men were seen moving about—men wearing the Mexican costume—but they were not pearl-divers. They fired their pistols, now and then, in the air, and seemed to be half-drunken.

In another quarter a little group of women and children, partly dressed, were huddled, and from them arose the cries that sent such a horror to the hearts of the men on the ridge.

They stood there as if fascinated, rooted to the spot.

No need to tell them what this terrible scene meant.

El Morte and his followers had struck the first blow in retaliation for the bitter defeat they had suffered at the casino.

While thus glued to the spot, their eyes drinking in the awful spectacle, a white-robed figure started out of the bushes, near at hand, and attempted to fly. The hand of Duncan stayed this flight, and wheeling the frightened specter around, he found that it was one of the Mexican women who belonged in the hamlet—the wife of his best friend among the pearl-divers.

There were dark stains upon her shoulders and the bosom of her garments. She held her hands to the sides of her head while she viewed them with horror-distended eyes.

Hal those dark stains were blood.

Duncan gently removed her hands; they, too, were covered with blood. He gave one look, and then his teeth closed with a snap.

Great God! the fiends had cut off her ears!

More than once, to his knowledge, had this barbarity been put into practice by malignant outlaws, but never before had he known women to be the victims.

His comrades were almost crazy with passion.

Gently he drew the heavy braids of wet, black hair over the source of mutilation, and then turned to his men.

"Blood for blood!" he said, with a steel-like ring in his voice.

CHAPTER VI.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

THE five pearl-divers repeated the words in such solemn thrilling tones that it seemed as though they were registered by an oath, as indeed they were.

"Blood for blood!"

Pointing down the slope Duncan continued:

"Comrades, there yet remain some of the despoilers of our homes, the mutilators of women. Not one of them must live to escape. Follow me to the death!"

They answered with cries that lost none of their venom because they were uttered with grim, compressed lips.

Down the slope they bounded, keeping in the shelter of the trees in order that those who were still left should have no warning of their approach.

Each man was trembling with eagerness to get at the desperadoes and avenge this cruel act, while more than one allowed his thoughts to dwell with painful emphasis upon those who were the sufferers.

The Shark-Slayer's mind was filled with fears for Little Texas. Had she too suffered this dastardly indignity? Perhaps it had been worse with her. Somehow, Duncan seemed to feel that the resentment of the outlaws was particularly directed toward him, as the leader in the deadly fracas of the preceding night, and if so would they not try to injure him through the one he was known to love?

His heart grew sick with this dreadful uncer-

tainty, and as they swept close by the little group of women and children in their onward rush, his quick eye noted that Little Texas was not there.

For the time being he must forget, and remember only that some of the men who had helped carry out this dastardly plot of the guerrilla captain were yet on the spot.

Like a simoon the little party of pearl-divers burst from the shelter of the trees.

The guerrillas were not too drunk to realize their danger, but they were given no opportunity to get away. Shots rung out, but they were now avenging shots, and each one told of a death that paid for some poor woman's wrongs.

Mercy was neither asked nor given.

The presence of the women near by, most of whom had suffered as had the one met upon the ridge, had an influence upon both parties. With every glance the men drank in new zeal to avenge the wrongs of these poor creatures, while the wretched guerrillas realized more truly how utterly vain would be an appeal for clemency, and thinking thus, died with oaths upon their lips.

The little tragedy did not consume more than two minutes, and when that time had elapsed four desperadoes lay near the smoking embers of the burned cabins, stark and dead. They had paid the debt of nature, and with their lives atoned in part for the cruel harm so lately done.

No sooner did he see the last of the guerrillas fall than Duncan sprung to where the women were huddled together.

Most of them were dumb with horror, and he began to despair of getting the answers he desired, when his eye lighted upon the old woman in whose charge Little Texas remained when she was not roaming the forest hunting game, having been taught by the old trapper who reared her to love the realms of nature.

Mother Margery was advancing toward him. He saw blood upon her garments, and knew that she, too, had been mutilated by the fiends in human shape, but she showed a dauntless front, which gave Duncan hope.

"Now, thank Heaven, I shall at least learn the worst. These poor women here are driven almost crazy with fright and pain, but old Margery is brave as a lion. The news may be terrible, but anything is better than this awful suspense."

As rapidly and coherently as she could talk, the old woman gave a brief account of what had taken place since the men had left the hamlet on the evening before to go to San Miguel.

The women had retired as usual, for it was no unusual thing for their lords and masters to be away through the night.

Midnight had come and gone, and it was even verging on toward the dawn, when they were suddenly aroused by shouts and shots and curses.

In glowing language the old woman told how they rushed out to find several cottages ablaze, with men riding or running this way and that—how they were seized and their ears cut off brutally with keen bowie-knives, while the scene around them was not unlike what Pandemonium might be.

Duncan could picture it all in his mind, and the dread scene would never leave him while he lived.

As yet she had said nothing of the one who was ever present in his mind.

"In the name of Heaven, old woman, what of Little Texas? Is she dead—have they murdered her?" he cried.

"Worse than that Duncan, worse than that. They have carried her off. Oh, Santa Maria, that I should have lived to witness such a sight. It was that devil El Morte himself. I can see her now, the brave girl, as she defied him to his face. She would have shot him too but the brute, oh, *santissima* what a sight, knocked her senseless with his fist and then bidding one of his men hand her up to him, rode away."

The Sea-Diver was white as a corpse, and his teeth seemed to be grinding some object into impalpable dust.

"So surely as there is a God above us, I will wipe out that blow in his blood. Hear my oath, ye smiling skies, and record it against me if my right arm fail when the hour for retribution arrives! The man who struck Little Texas can never live in the same world with Duncan, the Shark-Slayer!"

He lost no time.

Others of the pearl-divers had meantime arrived, panting and breathless, the latter half of of their journey from San Miguel having been made on the run as their ears were saluted by the shots and confusion of sounds that marked the onslaught of Duncan and his comrades upon the four half drunken Vultures who had remained too long for their health at the scene of their evil work.

Messengers were sent to the town to inform all of the horror that had been perpetrated just before dawn, so near San Miguel.

The effect of this news would be to make El Morte more of an object of fear to the cowardly populace than ever before, which was doubtless the main object of the guerrilla chieftain in

carrying out such a diabolical scheme, but the story of the outrage would inflame the mind of every brave man who was with them in this war upon the desperadoes, and for this reason, having nothing to lose and much to gain, Duncan felt that the facts could not be distributed too widely.

Couriers were sent to neighboring villages along the pearl coast, for as the Vultures were united it was only proper that the divers and their friends should effect a powerful organization, so as to be able to crush them.

Knowing that the mountain paths would be guarded, and any diver caught acting in the capacity of a messenger murdered in cold blood, boats were used instead, and these speedy white-winged couriers were soon speeding down the sea-coast and also beating on wide tacks against the wind in the other direction.

That the Coast Vultures had at least one retreat among the mountains was a fact well known.

Some years previous, their operations respecting the Government property having become too bold to be longer winked at, it was determined to send a military expedition against them. The long list of robberies and murders of mail-carriers and express messengers in the Government employ had failed to arouse the popular indignation until the Vultures, becoming bolder, had assailed the convoy that was taking the precious pearls which had accrued to the state as her third during the past six months, over the peninsula, bound for the City of Mexico.

Their value was great, for they represented one-third of the pearls found upon one hundred miles of coast in half a year, besides what gold and silver from the few mines then worked in the mountains, that was sent with the armed convoy, for greater safety.

This gross outrage had been the "last straw," and it was not long before the coast witnessed an influx of soldiers such as had never been known before.

The hunt was made in earnest but as might have been expected with far from satisfactory results.

When the Vultures found it warm in one quarter they vanished mysteriously, only to unite again at another strong position in the mountains, and at each one of these points quite a battle was fought.

The soldiers were bravely led, but their officers lacked brains, and such a thought as cutting off the retreat of the outlaws before assailing one of their forts probably never entered their heads.

This system of warfare was carried on, always at a loss to the soldiers, for weeks, until they mutinied, and could not be forced to go further into the mountains. As the only thing left to him, the commander held a conference with El Morte, the redoubtable leader of the *salteadores*, and between them was patched up a most remarkable treaty, whereby it was stipulated that so long as the guerrillas did not interfere with the business of the state, or become too much of a nuisance, they would not be troubled again by another invasion of Mexican soldiers.

Both parties had suffered severely in this guerrilla warfare and each was willing for different reasons to thus bring the conflict to a close.

In no other country under the sun could such a treaty have been made but in bandit-ruled Mexico, where celebrated outlaws have been known to impose a tax upon the people which they are bound to pay or suffer the consequences.

From the time of this absurd treaty the Vultures had ruled the coast, and with a high hand too.

With each year they had grown more bold because of the immunity granted them through his base alliance with the Government, until their crimes had grown unendurable, and unknown to them there had of late been formed a league among the hardy pearl-divers and others along the coast, which was intended to strike a blow at this powerful organization at an early date.

Though the Vultures had proven that they could afford to laugh at any effort on the part of the Mexican soldiery to take or kill them, they could not affect to despise the hostility of the new coast league, for it was composed of men who were not only brave but cunning as well, and led by a man born to command.

As yet El Morte knew nothing of the league, though he had his suspicions that there was some move in contemplation, but, being still inflated with his victory over the Government troops he feared nothing of this kind.

The leaders of the coast guard, they who were intrusted with the watch and ward over the oyster-boats to see that the Government was not cheated out of its share, were cognizant of the move to be made against El Morte, and most of them were ready to lend a helping hand when the affair culminated, for since more than one mail-carrier had been missing along the coast during the last year, and the Government officials robbed on several occasions, they held that the treaty had been

broken by the outlaws, and that therefore they were at liberty to act on the offensive.

Thus it will be seen that matters had almost reached a crisis when the first attempt was made to murder the Sea-Diver.

At the time he had suspected that El Morte had learned of the league and sought his life on this account, but the story of Little Texas regarding the mysterious stranger showed him that the cowardly deed was to have been done for gold.

Then came the awful battle in the casino in which the Vultures received their first costly lesson at the hands of the new league.

To wipe out the stain of that bitter defeat the guerrillas had committed this outrage, cutting off the ears of the seven women and carrying away one girl to death or worse than death.

After this there could come no peace between the rival leagues until one or the other was crushed. It must be war to the knife!

The tocsin sounded along the pearl coast; there was a hasty arming, and bodies of men moved hither and thither, obeying the orders of those they had chosen to lead them.

CHAPTER VII.

THE USE OF A LARIAT.

SOME ten miles north of the little town of San Miguel an arm of the sea cuts into the land, bordered on either side by giant cliffs, beyond which the country rolls away in hills and little plains, heavily wooded, here, and with a tall growth of grass there.

The scenery in this region is picturesque in the extreme, and possesses an almost tropical appearance, with flowers growing in rank confusion, the moss hanging in festoons from the branches, and birds singing on every hand.

Just as dusk was creeping over the face of this scene, on the day succeeding that terrible night at San Miguel, a human form might have been seen crawling through the grass upon the right high that looked down upon the placid water.

At times the man was entirely hidden from view by the rank growth, to reappear a minute later further on, and his course was steadily onward toward the edge of the wall.

Finally he reached a point where there could be no further progress, and parting the grass that hung out even upon the brink of the precipice, he looked out upon the sheet of water.

The shadows of night were beginning to creep over the scene, but as yet the vision was not obscured. He could see the white line half a mile away, marked by a narrow strip of sand that ran along the foot of the opposite cliff, and even the little ripples caused by the light evening breeze sweeping in from the ocean could be seen from his elevated outpost.

Below him the water washed the face of the rock as though it were a pier. Clinging vines, that found a foothold in various cracks and crannies along the face of the acclivity, grew in horizontal lines, covering the bare face of the rock, and hanging in great masses down to the very edge of the water, for the waves never arose to any height in this inlet, so suitable for a harbor.

This was not the first time the man had looked upon the scene, but he appeared to have a very deep interest in it now, for his movements were those of a spy.

From the glimpses that could be obtained of him from time to time, he appeared to have all the appearance of a *guerrillero*, his head and face being muffled up in a manner that would have defied recognition unless suspicion were aroused. A pair of exceedingly keen eyes gleamed under the shade of his sombrero, and these at once swept the surface of the water, as though their owner hoped and expected to see something.

If this were so he seemed doomed to disappointment, for the little arm of the sea was apparently deserted by human beings.

Gulls circled here and there, at times floating upon the bosom of the water, and in one quarter myriads of wild water-fowl were sporting themselves. A fish-hawk, after swooping down from its perch on a dead tree, was being in turn chased in great circles upward through the air by an eagle.

Here and there some great fish, perhaps a porpoise, would throw itself out of the water with a splash, but the man looked in vain for signs of human life upon the water.

He had just uttered an angry exclamation, that told of keen disappointment, when he suddenly raised his head to a listening attitude. Some sound had reached his ear that held him enthralled. With each passing second it came more plainly than before, until there could be no possible mistake concerning it.

Beyond a doubt it was the regular sound of oars working in the row-locks.

Still not a sign of human life upon all that expanse of water.

The man on the cliff made a test of the composition of the wall at its brink, and finding it strong enough to bear his weight, he bent forward.

As the grass still concealed him there was not the slightest possible chance of his being discovered, even should any one happen to be

looking toward the spot, which was hardly probable; and his new position enabled him to see a portion of the surface of the inlet that had up to this time been concealed from his observation.

This consisted of a stretch along the foot of the cliff whereon he was crouching.

The shadows lay more heavily here than in any other quarter, and although the sounds directed his attention to a moving object upon the water it was a little time before he could make out the lines of a boat being steadily propelled toward him.

Quite a number of figures were in the boat, half a dozen at least, and the man on the cliff strained his vision to the utmost to discern the nature of these occupants, but the dusky shadows baffled him.

This was hardly necessary, however, as he could well understand who would thus creep up the lonely sound at such a stealthy pace.

Nearer crept the boat.

The solitary watcher kept his eyes fastened upon it as though he feared lest it should suddenly vanish from view, there was something so spectral in the appearance of the boat at this hour, when the mystic gloaming lent an unnatural hue to every surrounding object.

It was well he did so, for when the strange canoe was exactly opposite the point on which he lay the prow was suddenly directed toward the wall of rock.

A man knelt in the bow, not to fend off, for the swift progress of the boat proved that there was an opening below into which it was intended to shoot.

The interested spectator above leaned forward, filled with surprise and satisfaction.

He saw the prow of the boat reach the line of rock with its progress still unchecked though the men had hastily shipped their oars, and when one would expect to hear the crash as it struck the base of the cliff, there was a quick movement of the man kneeling in the bow, the heavy mass of vines was raised, and the phantom boat with its occupants vanished from view.

The amazed spy, clinging half-way over the brink of the cliff above, witnessed this wonderful disappearance with a low cry that told the state of his mind.

Then he hastened to gain a more secure position, for in his eagerness he had come very near slipping, and a fall of fifty feet, followed by a plunge into the waters below would not have been the most delightful experience one could imagine, even if the unfortunate tumbler came out of the scrape with his life.

What he had just seen appeared to give the spy much satisfaction, yet he crouched there quite a time evidently forming his plans for future action.

The dusk gradually deepened into the darkness of night—the stars came out one by one, and at last the day had entirely vanished, to give place to another period of darkness.

In the western sky hung a trembling crescent of silver—the new moon, speeding toward the horizon to hide her fair face beneath the level profile of the great ocean. Night by night Luna would grow in size until a great yellow circle she would rule the starry heavens by her grandeur, rising at sunset and sweeping onward in her western march through the livelong night.

Finally the spy arose from his recumbent position.

A few words, muttered to himself, escaped his lips, and then turning his back upon the cliff he skulked away.

Half an hour later this same man came to a pause under the shadow of three trees that grew in the shape of a triangle. A little spring bubbled up within the triangle, and through an opening in the dense canopy overhead a single star shone down upon the gurgling water as though in benediction.

When he reached this spot the spy gave utterance to the melancholy hoot of a white owl, repeated four times.

There was nothing singular about the sound save that it was uttered once more than the natural habit of the bird, and this proclaimed it a signal.

It was immediately answered.

There came at once the strange bark of a coyote. The spy replied with the mysterious cry of that peculiar waterfowl, the loon, and was gratified to see a man break out from the bushes just beyond the brook and advance toward him.

This man was dressed in greasy buckskin, and beyond a doubt was a hunter, for he carried a long rifle in his hand, while the spy held no such weapon.

A consultation seemed to take place between the two men, during which the spy retailed all that he had seen. He appeared to give the hunter directions as to what he should do to assist in the plan that had been arranged between them, after which they parted, the man in buckskin plunging into the chaparral and heading so as to move along the side of the coast ridge in the direction of San Miguel, while the spy retraced his steps toward the sound with its precipitous walls.

Reaching the very spot where he had crouch-

ed while the mysterious canoe entered the unseen cavity back of the vines beneath him, the spy took an observation.

All was quiet upon the water.

Even the light breeze had died away, leaving the water smooth as glass, and looking down he could see mirrored in its depths the starry constellations of the dark vault above.

From up the water toward the head of the sound, where the land was low and swampy, the water-fowl had taken their positions for the night, and anon could be heard the peculiar trumpeting of the white swan, the "honk, honk," of wild geese settling down from their flight, and the splashing of myriads of ducks.

Beyond these sounds nothing broke the silence of the night.

Having made an examination of his surroundings, the spy uncoiled a long lariat which he had secured from the old hunter, and which appeared to have seen much service, though stanch as iron cable.

One end of this he secured to a tree that grew near the edge of the precipice, and then it was lowered its full length.

The object in this was manifest—the spy intended lowering himself to the spot where almost two hours earlier he had watched the strange canoe vanish into the face of the rock.

It was a daring venture, and no one but a bold man would ever risk such chances. Whoever this man might be, he was ready to put his life in the balance when carrying out this scheme.

Over the edge he crept, and with a dextrous movement succeeded in grasping the rope below the point where it rested upon the edge of the rock.

He now hung in mid-air—above the sky—below the sea.

Any little accident would hurl him down fifty feet to the water, but all these chances had been considered before he ventured upon the undertaking, and his mind no longer dwelt upon them. His only fear was of discovery by some of those whose haunt he was now about to invade.

Down the lariat he went, sliding fully twenty feet before coming to a pause. Then, with an opportunity to rest his weight upon a little ledge, he remained a minute or so listening intently to ascertain whether there was any indication below that would point to a suspicion of danger.

Realizing that he had little to fear in this respect, the spy continued his downward movement, but his progress was now much slower, for he knew not when he would come to the end of the lariat.

Fortunately, his calculations in regard to this were correct, for the rope reached within a few feet of the water, and he found a good place where he could rely upon the stoutness of the clinging vines. Back of these was the cavity. Investigation soon showed him that there was a ledge of rock here which would be of advantage to him, and he hastily availed himself of the opportunity.

He drew a revolver so as to be ready for emergencies, cast one look upward and out upon the water to impress the situation more fully upon his mind and then, without hesitation, plunged at once into the unknown depths, threading the passage that seemed to penetrate the bowels of the earth.

Outside, the rope for a time swayed to and fro along the face of the rocky wall, the wind arose and ruffled the bosom of the sound, the trumpet notes of the white swan mingled with the hoarse cry of the wild goose, but the daring man who had slipped down the precipice had vanished utterly from view, going to invade the tiger's den, the haunt of the Vultures of the Coast.

CHAPTER VIII.

LITTLE TEXAS IN PERIL.

"I WOULD SOONER wed death than such a monster."

A sneering laugh greeted these words of desperation from the lips of the young girl.

"Caramba! you think so now, but your mind will change, Little Texas. In half an hour the old padre whom I have sent for will arrive and we will have the ceremony performed. A royal time it will be to my brave Vultures; they shall make a night of it."

"El Morte, why do you persecute me in this way? Surely, I have never wronged you, and I know that there is not a particle of love for me in your heart."

"I do not mind telling you, girl. Revenge is sweet. I hate the man who is your friend, and through you I will reach his heart. He has led the pearl-divers against me, and for that alone I could hate him, but there is another, a burning cause. Hal my eyes saw beneath the disguise he wore when she put me on the track. In Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, I have found a man who I believed had passed out of my life forever, and whom I have reason to hate. He does not know or suspect me—my appearance is vastly different to what it was when last we met. Through you I mean to wrench his heart. Say not a word, girl; pleadings would be useless with me."

"I would not descend to such a depth; you do not know me, El Morte. I am a hunter's daughter, used to peril. What you threaten does not frighten me. Little Texas can defy you, and if the worst comes she may find a dagger for your heart and her own."

The girl's eyes blazed with the fire that burned in her soul, and her looks had some influence on the outlaw chieftain for he stood there a moment wrapped in contemplation and then muttering something between his teeth left the place.

Stone walls surrounded the girl, and high overhead was a roof of the same cold material, but the rays of the antique lamp, set in a bracket at one side of the place, failed to illumine the rocky ceiling, leaving a space above, filled with vague shadows, through which at times the whirring of bats' wings came, they finding ingress and egress through unknown apertures far above the range of vision.

Around the lower portion of the apartment, there had been draped with no little artistic skill, robes and rich fabrics, while the coldness of the floor was softened by great furry rugs.

Quite a number of handsome pieces of furniture were to be seen, much of which, though costly, was of antique make, and had probably been secured as plunder from time to time in the past during the various raids of the Coast Vultures.

Little Texas was left alone in this apartment. Though her spirit was so brave, the girl was troubled regarding her probable fate.

All before her looked dark and gloomy, without one ray of sunlight, and in spite of her daring words, she was utterly helpless, being without a weapon.

As her eyes roved around the chamber, they fell upon a rich-looking old desk, made of rosewood and inlaid. It stood higher than her head, altogether, and had undoubtedly been carried off to enrich this private room of El Morte in the secret home under the white cliffs.

With renewed hope she flew to this and began searching its interior, filled with quantities of things that had evidently been hastily run over by the guerrilla captain in search of any treasure that might have been hidden there.

Eagerly she searched the old desk.

At last a cry of delight broke from her lips, and she held aloft a little silver dagger with a pearl handle, evidently once the property of some lady of note.

"Thank Heaven for this! Now I can at least avenge my wrongs. El Morte must beware, or the coast will be freed of its terror by the hand of a woman."

She hid the tiny weapon away; and then sat down upon a pile of costly furs, to await developments. Time flew by, unheeded by the girl, whose thoughts ranged backward, and who was once more ranging the forests and chaparrals with her trusty rifle.

From this quiet mood she was suddenly aroused by the entrance of El Morte.

Little Texas had just taken note of the flying bats above, and wondered if it were possible to reach the openings near the roof, which were positively there, though unseen, when the entrance of the guerrilla chieftain broke in upon her speculations.

El Morte had evidently been drinking, for his face was flushed, and his eye gleamed like the orb of a tiger. A thrill passed through the young girl's frame, and then she was once more calm, brave and determined.

One hand clutched the little silver dagger in the folds of her buckskin skirt, while her eyes were veiled under the long lashes, though she watched El Morte keenly.

"Come, my beauty, the padre awaits. *Por Dios*, we shall have a royal wedding. It is not every girl whom El Morte would wed. To be a bandit queen is an honor in this country."

Little Texas answered not a word. She took the arm of the guerrilla captain, though unable to repress a shudder of loathing as she did so, for it was his right arm—the one that had probably dealt many a murderous stroke in times past.

She had determined to bide her time.

The iniquitous ceremony that would be gone through with could have no force, and by living a few hours she might discover a chance to escape. There were ringing in her ears the words of the guerrilla captain regarding Duncan—it was evident that he bore the Shark-Slayer some deadly hatred for events far in the past, and that this spirit of revenge would have borne fruit long since had he been aware of Duncan's identity.

That he meant mischief toward the Sea-Diver there could be no doubt in the world, and her thoughts and fears were more on his account than her own.

When they issued forth from the captain's "boudoir" and entered the main room, loud cries arose from the host of desperadoes constituting the Vulture league. There were fully two-score of them present, men of every class imaginable, but with the word "ruffian" stamped indelibly upon the features of every man, be he Mexican, American, or half-breed Indian.

There stood forth a man wearing a long,

shovel-shaped hat and a gown. Little Texas recognized him as a padre who had a bad reputation in the neighborhood of San Miguel, being ready to serve the devil himself if the price suited.

Upon the faces of those surrounding her, not a gleam of pity or kindness could be seen. These men were human wolves, ghouls lost to all the nobler sensibilities of manhood. Their evil faces had a repellent appearance, while their eyes, inflamed with liquor, sent a cold shudder through her frame.

There was no mercy here.

The padre was beneath her notice; she would not waste her breath upon him. Turning to El Morte, she spoke in low but forcible tones, that were plainly heard by all.

"Captain El Morte, since you are determined to carry out this grim joke of yours, which is a matter of life and death with me, hear a few words before you go on. You know me: I am Little Texas, and I know how to handle a rifle. No man ever saw me cringe before danger. You have me in a tight fix, but I fear you not. Man, beast nor devil can ever bring a cry of terror from my lips. This wrong will be terribly avenged. There is not a man among you who will not feel the fury of Duncan, the Shark-Slayer. You have aroused one who will never rest until he has wiped out the Vulture gang. Beware, you fiends in human shape, for the hour of vengeance may come when least you expect it. There are men upon your trail who never sleep. Again I tell you, beware!"

A groan of derision mocked her.

More than one man cringed beneath her words, however, for they seemed to contain the ring of prophecy, and her brave attitude standing there and bidding them defiance to their teeth was such as to impress them, rough rascals though they were.

Even the base padre seemed to wince.

He moved uneasily, and the long shovel-shaped hat which protruded in front and rear, hiding his face as though he were in heart ashamed to be seen in such a motley crew, trembled and vibrated with his emotion.

Possibly he had aided the devil El Morte on more than one occasion in the past, and the thought of danger being associated with such work had never before entered his befogged brain. The guerrilla chief had ruled as the king of the coast, and no one who obeyed his commands had aught to fear.

The words of the brave girl, as she thus defied El Morte and his villainous crew must have awakened fears that had long lain dormant in his breast—he learned that the guerrilla had aroused the pearl-divers to mutiny against his reign, and that the enemy was led by a no less redoubtable personage than Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, a man of whom he must have heard more than once.

This was without a doubt the only thing that could cause the padre's head-gear to vibrate with such a trembling motion that even the half-drunken El Morte noticed it.

"Hola, padre, why do you shiver? *Por Dios!* man, art thou afraid of the vain vaporings of this damsel? By my soul, it is a good thing you adopted the priest's culling, for as one of my men you would have long since occupied a *cache* in the bowels of the earth. I shoot every coward in my band, for fear lest the disease may be catching. There is not a man among my followers but who is a dare-devil and a tiger."

In this the valiant captain lied, for although his men could in truth show themselves to be devils when they had congenial work in hand, which could be carried out with little or no danger at the time, such as slicing off women's ears or shooting helpless men, there were many among them who would have shrunk from meeting an armed foe face to face, although they were terrible in their boastings regarding things that never had taken place, and with their consent never would.

His words seemed to reassure the timid padre, for he produced a well-thumbed missal, and moved forward a step or two until he had the couple in front of him, and his back toward the strange room from whence they had just issued.

Little Texas let her eyes fall upon the book.

As she did so she started perceptibly, and it was only with difficulty that she refrained from uttering a cry. A ring upon one of the fingers of the padre's hand had caught her attention, and when she raised her eyes it was to vainly endeavor to see beneath the peaked brim of the padre's hat.

By this time the men had grown impatient.

They crowded about, though keeping a respectful distance from the captain, whom they feared as though he were in truth an emissary of Satan.

"Make haste, padre; don't you see the bride is anxious to have the ceremony over, while my merry men fairly quiver to drink foamy bumpers to their new queen. Go on, I say."

The captain's voice was imperative, and woe to the man who refused to obey when it thus rung out.

"Before this mummery goes any further, I wish to enter a last protest. This man is my mortal foe and I hate him. If with this declara-

tion and my absolute silence, you can call this a marriage, proceed with the farce. I, for one, refuse to abide by its results," and Little Texas gripped the silver dagger more firmly in her hand as she fastened her blazing orbs upon the face of El Morte.

"*Carajo!*" hissed the guerrilla; "for the last time, padre, I command you to proceed. Your life for it, if you do not tie this knot more securely than the one Alexander cut with his sword. Say on!"

"Hold!" came a clear voice just then, and all eyes were turned upon the speaker, thus daring to balk the programme of the great El Morte.

CHAPTER IX.

BRAVELY DONE.

A MAN advanced with quick strides.

He was delicate in frame, dressed in Mexican garb, and had a dashing air about him that was peculiarly striking. His voice was as clear and resonant as a bell, and there was a vibrating ring in the tones that startled more than one of those who participated in the strange tableau.

El Morte turned with the rest.

His brow darkened as he saw who thus interrupted the scene, and then a shrewd look passed over his face.

"*Carissima!* Don Pablo, you know not what you do. I am furthering your vengeance in bringing misery upon this girl. Through her I strike the heart of Duncan."

"Do not implicate me in this scheme. I have bitter cause to hate the man you call Duncan, and could I have him here under my dagger," and a bright blade gleamed in the torch-light, "I would end my trail of vengeance by burying this in his heart, but I do not war upon women. I refuse to take any responsibility for the cruel deed you are now committing. More than that I protest against such an outrage."

"Much good your protest will do, my fine don. This is the eyrie of the Vultures, and I rule here," said El Morte with a sneering laugh that sent the hot blood dancing through the cheeks of the gentleman cavalier.

With an exclamation indicative of sudden anger he snatched a revolver from his sash, but before he could raise it the weapon was knocked from his hand by some of the Vultures near by.

Gleaming eyes fell upon Don Pablo, and it was evident that the human tigers around him only needed a word from their captain to tear the other to pieces.

El Morte seemed half tempted to give the word, but shook his head as though realizing that the death of this mysterious Don Pablo would deprive him of a valuable ally in the hunt for the life of the Shark-Slayer, and besides interfere with some cunning plan which he had arranged in the past.

"Have a care now, my fine cavalier, or you may not live to see Duncan dead at your feet as I promised you. Stand aside and witness a bride wedding. I absolve you from any interest in this affair. Since seeing you last I have discovered that I too have good reason to hate Duncan, and it is to send the iron shaft into his soul, laden with torture, that I carry out this plan. He loves Little Texas—through her I shall strike home. Now, padre, proceed, and on your life let no further interruption take place, else I will not be responsible for the consequences. Gentlemen, the performance will now begin."

The words were uttered in such a tone as might have been made use of by a master of ceremonies.

True enough the performance did begin, but with the rising of the curtain the audience, and especially the master of ceremonies, were struck dumb with amazement.

The padre had up to this time been a side figure upon the stage, of little account, but now he suddenly drew the attention of all by his strange actions. Hardly had the words of El Morte been given utterance to than the man in the long black gown and shovel hat appeared to be seized of a devil.

He hurled the heavy missile which he had held in his hand up to this time, with such force that the volume striking the guerrilla chieftain in the face almost lifted him from his feet and at least staggered him.

With one sweep of his hand the padre ripped open his long gown and tossed it from him, while at the same instant he dashed the great hat into the startled crowd.

The metamorphosis was startling. Instead of the bent figure of the villainous old padre there now confronted the band of guerrillas a dashing man whom every soul of them knew at a glance. Great was the momentary consternation that seized upon them at this tremendous change of characters. The padre had been brought into the cavern beyond a peradventure and yet at some time since his arrival he had been metamorphosed into the man of all men whom these *salteadores* of the coast feared.

The voice of Don Pablo was the first to ring out.

"It is Duncan, the Sea-Diver!"

The name was caught up by a score of voices and rung angrily through the vaulted chambers of the cavern under the cliffs.

Yes, it was brave Duncan.

He it was whose progress we watched down the face of the cliff, the spy who had entered the lion's den. There were a few changes in his dress, but as he stood there at bay, with the human wolves around him, no one could have failed to recognize the dashing leader of the pearl-divers.

A few words will explain his presence there in the guise of the rascally padre.

Half an hour from his entrance to the passageway at the foot of the cliff, Duncan found himself in a little niche off the main cavern, and which from the light burning in it he saw was really a room, used at times by El Morte as a sleeping-apartment.

Hearing the approach of some one he had secreted himself under a pile of furs. El Morte had entered with the padre, and from his place of concealment Duncan could hear all that passed between them as they discussed a bottle of wine.

This put him into possession of all the facts bearing on the case, and when El Morte went out, promising to summon the padre inside of half an hour, when all would be ready for the ceremony, he conceived a brilliant scheme which was at once put into execution.

To secure the padre was a small job.

It only necessitated his crawling stealthily out from under the furs, creeping like a panther across the intervening space, and then a clutch of his iron hands finished the business. The priest struggled desperately, squirming like an eel, the look of complacency that had sat upon his fat features having been frozen into an expression of the wildest terror, but it was of no use, and in five minutes he was reduced to a state of insensibility.

Duncan stripped him of his gown, bound him hand and foot, and forcing a gag between his teeth rolled him over to a corner as though he were a log, and concealed him beneath the furs.

After this he had assumed the gown, hidden his face beneath the rolled brim of the great shovel-shaped hat, and sat down to discuss the small amount of wine left by the genuine padre.

He made sure that his weapons were all in order, for he knew full well that desperate work was before him. No man should harm Little Texas while he lived, and though a thousand dangers surrounded him yet was he ready to snatch her from death even though his life paid the forfeit.

At last one of the band came to summon him and without a tremor the Shark-Slayer strode out among his foes. The rest the reader already knows.

The bravery of Little Texas had excited his admiration, and it was this that had caused him to tremble when the captain believed he was shivering with fear.

Never were men more dumfounded than those in the den of the guerrillas at this terrible disclosure. The girl had threatened them with the righteous anger of the Shark-Slayer, and the sudden appearance of Duncan in their midst sent a thrill of alarm through each cowardly frame.

As for El Morte, he staggered under the blow he had received, but the sight of the face he hated appearing from under the padre's hat, and a knowledge that he was being braved to his teeth seemed to have the effect of restoring him.

Little Texas had torn away from his clasp at the very moment of Duncan's hurling the volume into his face. With the rapidity of thought the brave border girl now snatched a revolver from the belt of the guerrilla leader, and then sprung to the side of the Shark-Slayer.

By this time Duncan had both of his barkers out and was looking along their shining barrels at the Vulture gang.

"Gentlemen," said he, impressively, "if any of you court death, step up. I will give you a free pass to eternity."

To the girl at his side he said quickly:

"We must retreat to the room you came from, Little Texas. Look and see if the way is clear. I dare not take my eyes from these jaguars even for a second lest they leap."

"The way is clear, and the door stands open," she replied.

"Then hasten in and be ready to shut it after me."

She did as he commanded, and when Duncan knew that she was safe beyond the reach of any flying bullets, which was one object he had in view when giving her this task, he began his own retreat.

This was attended with considerable danger.

The men he faced were many of them reckless characters who would not hesitate about tackling a mad panther, and if he removed his gaze from them one instant it would be fatal.

Still they had good reason to fear him. On the preceding night he had braved their redoubtable captain, and led the pearl-divers in desperate battle in the dark which had ended in the demoralization of the guerrillas. The dark deed of wanton cruelty that had since been committed by these men still remained fresh in their minds, and the shrieks of the poor women

seemed to be ringing in their ears, calling aloud for terrible vengeance.

Some of them even turned half-way around as though filled with the belief that the Shark-Slayer was not alone, and that his dare-devil comrades were hiding in the vaulted passages near by, ready to rush out at a signal. If Duncan could find the entrance to the cliff cavern why not more of their foes.

Step by step the daring Sea-Diver was now retreating toward the door leading into the smaller apartment, and yet as he thus retreated he kept his eyes glued upon his foes. The man who ventured to be the first in raising a weapon must die, even though the ringing report of his weapon were the signal for a volley that would cut short his own life.

"Carajo! Kill the dog! Shoot him down! Cut him, hack him, how him! Cowards, all; would you let him brave you to your teeth? A thousand reals for the first shot—a hundred golden onzas to the man who kills the devil!"

It was El Morte who thus fumed and shouted, foaming at the mouth with diabolical fury. He would have snatched a pistol from his belt himself and have done the deed, but as his hand swept across his waist it found no weapon save his sheath-knife, Little Texas having relieved him of his gold-mounted revolver.

Besides, knowing that he had the most to fear from the man, Duncan kept him covered with one of his weapons, and there was a frowning menace in the black tubes bearing upon him that restrained the captain from being too active, otherwise he might have snatched a weapon from a man near by and have used it upon the resolute enemy.

Step by step, backward, went the Shark-Slayer.

The door was now reached—another step and he would have passed its portal. He knew that more than one hand was on a revolver among those rough desperadoes, and that even now he could not be assured of safety.

"Ready, girl. When I leap back shut quickly, but keep out of range for God's sake," he aspirated, hoarsely.

"Ready, Duncan," came Little Texas's reassuring words.

A pistol-shot sounded at this moment. One of the guerrillas had fired without raising his revolver, and the bullet cut a lock of hair from the head of the Sea-Diver. Like an echo came the report of his two weapons. The man who fired went down like a log, and also a fellow who was about throwing a huge revolver on a level.

Duncan gave an agile spring backward, and then dropped like lightning to the floor, just as the vaulted chambers of the cliff cavern rung with the report of many weapons. That maneuver saved his life, and ere another shot could be fired, Little Texas had slammed the heavy oaken door shut.

"Bravely done, Little Texas!" cried Duncan, as he sprang erect.

CHAPTER X.

THE SHARK-SLAYER AT BAY.

THE heavy door had not been shut a moment too soon, for even as it clanged to several more shots echoed through the place, but the bullets were stayed by the planks of oak which composed the obstruction.

Duncan sprang to the assistance of the girl.

Little Texas was already endeavoring to raise into place a heavy bar with which the door was provided on the inside, the room belonging to the cautious El Morte who intended having some means of holding his enemies at bay should they manage by some manner of means to gain ingress to the passages and corner him.

With one sweep of his hand the Shark-Slayer swung the bar into its socket, and then he realized that the human wolves were balked of their prey for the time being.

So far things had turned out remarkably well for the two against whom the whole of the Vulture band was pitted, but it was not probable that El Morte and his men would lose much time in following up the attack.

The first thing Duncan did was to turn to his companion and clasp her in his arms.

"God bless you, Little Texas. We will baffle the devils yet."

"We will, Duncan—I know—I feel it. In the darkest hour of my despair I believed you would come. I felt sure you would not desert Little Texas at any rate. When I saw that ring on the padre's hand it sent a shock all through me, for I knew it beyond all others. You did not see me cringe, Duncan?"

"Never, my girl. You were as brave as a rock. When you defied El Morte it almost took my breath away with admiration. But we must lose no time, for they will not let us long rest. In a few hours my brave boys will be here. We must elude our foes in some manner until that time comes."

He examined his revolvers and filled the two empty chambers. Hardly had he done so before a blow sounded on the door.

It was not a kick of baffled rage from one of

the bandits without, but a sturdy stroke, such as would only come from an ax in the hands of one who knew how to wield it.

Duncan's brow darkened.

He saw that the outlaws were determined to press matters to a focus without delay. It would not take them long at that rate to burst the door in, and once this was accomplished the balance of the struggle might be too awful for contemplation.

The Shark-Slayer cast his eyes around him.

Nothing but the walls of the apartment met his view, covered in many places with robes, fancy Mexican blankets, and rich goods captured by the guerrillas in some of their raids.

He hastily made the circuit of the place, sweeping these hangings aside as he went, and half-expecting to find in some corner a secret means of entering and leaving the apartment which was thus hidden from view; but in this he was disappointed, for no such opening was to be found.

Then he cast his eyes upward.

The discharge of the fire-arms had rung through the vaulted chambers of the cavern with thundering echoes, and the unusual racket seemed to have aroused a multitude of bats, for their wings kept up a constant whirring in the gloom high up, and it was this sound that had first drawn the Shark-Slayer's attention.

A bold project flashed into his mind.

At such a time one's brain is stirred to unusual activity by the very danger that menaces, and like lightning it came to Duncan that after all this might be a means of escape from the den of vipers.

There must be openings above of some kind, else the bats could not have gained an entrance, though it was a question, of course, as to whether these openings would be of any avail in effecting the escape of human beings.

Still it was a plan worth trying. He had noticed the roughness of the walls on the side opposite the door, and believed that to agile and determined persons the feat of climbing the side of the vaulted apartment would not be so difficult an undertaking.

In a few words he hastily communicated his new idea to Little Texas, who heartily agreed with him. No time was to be lost, for the Vultures were already assailing the door, and the heavy strokes of the ax echoed through the place in a dismal refrain.

They found that although, as a general thing, the climbing was easy, yet in places difficulties awaited them, and it was only through the indomitable spirit that possessed them they were enabled to overcome these obstacles.

Higher and higher they mounted.

The outlaws kept whacking away at the oaken door, and from the splitting, tearing sounds that followed each ax-stroke it was evident they were making kindling-wood of it.

They had now reached a point where the light of the ancient silver lamp below failed to disclose the nature of the wall to them, so that they were obliged to make the delicate sense of feeling take the place of eyesight.

Although they could see every foot of the room below, they themselves were undoubtedly wrapped in gloom.

Around them the noisome bats swooped and more than once one of the circling creatures struck Duncan or his brave little companion. The situation was anything but pleasant, in fact to stop and contemplate it was appalling.

A slip of the hand and a terrible death must ensue, for the fall was such that one could hardly make it and live.

To a man the situation was terrible enough, yet how much more so must it have been to a girl. Still Little Texas was grit to the core; where Duncan went, there she could go, and there she would go.

By this time the guerrillas had sadly damaged the heavy door, and at any moment they were apt to break through. What new peril would this bring to the fugitives clinging to the face of the wall was easily foreseen.

Duncan had just felt a cool breath of air upon his cheek and was endeavoring to locate the spot from whence it seemed to come, when there came a crash below, followed by a startled exclamation from Little Texas. Looking down he saw that the door had finally been burst from its heavy hinges by the repeated strokes of the ax which had also cut through the panels and partially severed the oaken bar, so that the whole fabric had gone down together.

The Shark-Slayer knew that danger was now imminent. Had they given him a minute or two longer he felt satisfied that he could have discovered the source of the fresh air, and in all probability have reached a place of safety with his companion.

At the moment he chanced to be at a point where there was a rocky projection something like the horn of a saddle from which a mustanger's lasso hangs, and one of his legs having been thrown over this his arms were consequently at liberty to a more or less degree.

No sooner did he hear the crash that accompanied the falling of the door than snatching a revolver from his sash he pulled back the hammer and covered the doorway. Even in that

moment of haste he was wise enough to make due allowance for the fact that he was almost above the object of his attention, as shooting from such a position is almost as deceptive as firing over a waste of water.

As he had instantly surmised would be the case, no sooner was the door down than there was a chorus of yells without and several men pushed through the opening.

Then came the crack of Duncan's revolver, the reports sounding peculiarly muffled when proceeding from the top of the walled-in apartment.

This was speedily seconded by other shots. Little Texas had joined in, and for a brief space of time the reports were so rapid that they seemed to be fired by machinery, blending together in one long roll that spoke of death. When it ceased a deathly silence fell upon the scene, broken only by a groan or two from below.

Duncan looked down and saw quite a little heap of men piled up in the doorway, and upon the broken door.

Dead or wounded they attested to the accuracy of the aim of the two who clung to the face of the wall, and served as an awful warning to the other guerrillas without.

Whether El Morte knew what was being attempted by those in the boudoir or not, was a question that could not then be positively settled, but it was to be presumed that he did, for some of the bandits may have been simply wounded and backed out of the death-trap, from whose hurts it would be easy to learn that the shots had come from above.

As soon as he realized that a second attempt was not likely to be made in a hurry Duncan set about searching for the place where the fresh air came from. In this he was more successful than even his most sanguine hopes had led him to believe was possible.

Groping upward he found another projection much after the style of the one on which he had rested when sending the shots into the midst of the guerrillas.

This served him as a resting-place while he continued his investigations, and inside of a minute he had made a discovery that thrilled him through and through with satisfaction.

There was an opening of considerable extent within his reach, and through it came a draught of air, not fresh but apparently so when compared with the fetid atmosphere about the roof of the cavern, proceeding from the lamp below, kept burning almost constantly.

Without losing time Duncan crawled into this aperture, and then bending down called hoarsely in a whisper:

"This way, Little Texas, as fast as you can, but for God's sake be careful, child, not to slip. I have found what we seek."

The words came like a benison to the poor girl, clinging to the face of the cliff-like wall, and whose strength was well-nigh exhausted, although she was game to the heart.

With an effort she moved toward the point in the darkness from whence came Duncan's voice, as well as she could locate him.

From above he could see her lithe form outlined against the light below, and lying flat upon his breast he awaited an opportunity to assist her. He would have gone to her aid but this was impossible, for instead of helping her he might only have impeded her progress in scaling the wall.

With his heart in his throat, so to speak, he kept his eyes glued upon her slender form.

Once he uttered a startled cry as he saw that she was unable to maintain the position in which she chanced to be placed, but the girl had a knowledge of the rocky horn just beyond, and risking all she bent forward and just caught it. Had the projecting stone been six inches further away she would have missed it, and nothing could have saved her from being dashed down to the rocky floor below.

From this point her progress was easier, for she followed in the path Duncan had just passed over.

The Shark-Slayer breathed easier, when he saw that she was safe, but he was trembling all over from the effects of the shock he had received when he saw the risk she had taken.

She was now within his reach.

Just as he passed his arms about her slender form to lift her bodily over the edge, there was report blow that evidently proceeded from a revolver. At the same moment the light went out. The bullet had been well aimed and accomplished its work. Darkness now reigned in the apartment and the guerrillas might enter without fear of being made targets of.

A rush could be heard as they leaped over the broken door and the recumbent forms of their comrades.

Duncan raised Little Texas over the edge of the wall, and placed her beside him. Not an instant too soon was this done, for from below came flash after flash as a dozen revolvers sounded, and the report thundered like muffled drum-notes through the caverns of the cliff. It was evident that the Vultures had a very fair idea of the place where our friends were hanging when they fired upon them before, and were determined to bring them down.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MOUNTAIN-DEVIL.

HAPPILY Duncan and his brave girl companion were beyond the reach of the shower of bullets sent upward by the enraged guerrillas below, and the only effect the volley had was to chip off pieces of stone or stalactites depending from the roof, and to bring down a couple of vampire bats, one of which being wounded and falling upon the bare head of a Greaser, instantly entangled itself in his bushy hair and pulled with desperation while at the same time its needle-like teeth met in the top of his ear, to the horror and consternation of the fellow, who ran screeching about, crying that the devil had surely gotten hold of him, until relieved of his load by a companion more courageous than the ordinary.

Some time passed without a move being made.

Hearing nothing from those they sought, the guerrillas at last mustered up courage enough to produce a light.

They were not fired upon, which was one satisfaction, but the torch did not reveal what had become of the fugitives, and as their course up the wall was plainly marked, several of the most desperate among the *salteadores* began to scale the height.

Slowly they ascended.

It was not known even then what had become of those they sought, and when one of the men perched upon the saddlehorn and found the loathsome bats beating about his head, he swore he would not proceed a foot further without a light.

There was now a line of men all the way down the face of the wall, so that it was in fact an easy matter to pass an extra torch up to the man who so loudly bawled for a light.

This fellow knew what risks he ran in accepting this, as it might make him a target for the death dealing revolver of the Shark-Slayer, but he preferred to accept this positive danger rather than longer continue clinging to the face of the wall in the utter darkness, with the bats flapping their ghoulish wings against his cheeks and threatening to make him lose his hold.

No sooner did the fellow raise the torch aloft than there arose a cry from those below.

They could plainly see an opening in the wall about six feet above his head, through which proceeded a string of bats, entering and leaving the apartment now occupied by the guerrillas solely, for there could be no doubt that those they sought were no longer in the cavern, but had made their exit through this cavity.

Still the leading fellow advanced slowly and cautiously.

He had reason to fear lest the enemy might be lying in wait for him along the shelf of rock above, and this alone would have made his progress laborious, even without taking into consideration the difficulties that beset his way.

El Morte was below, and directed the men in a loud voice.

The guerrilla chieftain was furiously angry, and his dark brows were knitted and seamed, while his dark eyes fairly flamed with the rage that possessed his soul.

Never before had he been braved in this manner—never had a member of his band met death from an enemy in this home under the cliffs until Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, invaded the den.

They saw the leading man crawl over the edge of the rock, and waving his torch aloft, apparently peer into the gloom beyond, as though some moving object had caught his gaze. Then the silence that had reigned was broken by a wild cry. The man above was seen to turn as though eager to flee, but the black abyss frowned upon his vision, and he wheeled again like lightning.

Something was seen to flash in his right hand, his left still gripping the torch. It was a knife. Some fearful danger menaced him, for they could see that he showed all the symptoms of fear, and only faced about because he was in a corner.

The men below were spellbound. It was as though a panorama was being enacted before their eyes.

Before they could draw another breath there was a second cry from the terrified man above, and some great object flashed through space and leaped upon him.

Well they knew the spotted flanks, the broad chest marked with a black band, the gleaming orbs and distended jaws that revealed the cruel white teeth. It was the terrible mountain-devil—the jaguar of the chaparral!

Even the bravest hunter may well hesitate before assailing this beast. Even the panther is not so dreaded in the country where he roams as is the jaguar of Mexico.

Then was heard a crunching of bones as the great jaws closed on the arm that held the light. For once the animal did not fear fire, or was so maddened from some cause that it gave no heed to the natural instinct of fear.

The Mexican, in spite of his terror, struck home with his *machete*, which sunk deep into the gleaming side of the animal; but the jaguar only became more fierce, and the gnaw-

ing was even more plainly heard by those below, though speedily drowned in the frantic yells of the horrified wretch.

There was no help for him.

The nearest man was five feet away and clinging to the face of the rock, could not have found an opportunity to use his pistol even if he had had the nerve to make the attempt, while to those below the chance of striking their comrade was just about as strong as of hitting the jaguar, so that they too were debarred from giving the wretch any assistance.

The combat was brief.

Such was the impetuosity of the jaguar's assault that it bore the man back by degrees until unknown to himself he stood upon the very brink of the ledge over which he had clambered not more than half a minute before.

Those below saw the new peril to which he was exposed, and some of them shouted to him, but his yells of terror drowned all else, and they could neither make him hear nor understand. As the next best thing under the circumstances they moved away from the spot beneath, and prepared their revolvers in order to give the animal a warm reception in case it came down too.

The catastrophe which they were expecting was not long delayed. There was a louder shriek than ordinary from the man who fought on the ledge with the king of the chaparral, and then his foot slipping, man, torch and jaguar left the rock and came whirling down in a confused mass, the torch looking like a falling meteor shooting through space.

With a horribly suggestive thud some object struck the solid rock that formed the floor of the apartment.

It was the man.

He lay there a motionless mass, the life having evidently departed from his body; but where was the fierce animal that had caused all this commotion? Many of the guerrillas had seen it start downward when their comrade toppled over, but during the rush through space they had lost sight of the flashing body of the yellow and black jaguar.

It had not struck with the man, else some of them would have assuredly seen it, and they had been intently watching.

El Morte ran his eye up along the face of the wall in a line with the course taken by the descent of the unfortunate man who lay there a quivering mass.

Hal! what was that? A pair of gleaming eyes seemed to cut the semi-gloom above his head, and by looking intently he could make out a form clinging to the rock about half-way down from the point where the fight had occurred.

Up went his revolver, and with a hasty aim he fired.

The bullet must have struck the jaguar, for the animal at once let go its hold upon the wall and descended into the midst of the men.

Then began an animated scene. The animal though sorely wounded from the blows received from the *machete* of the first man, and the bullet of El Morte, still possessed abundant life and energy, enough it seemed to make it pretty hot for the guerrilleros, who had no desire to feel the jaguar's cruel teeth meeting in arm, leg or throat, and hence kept up an animated dance hither and thither, popping away at the brute whenever an opportunity presented itself, at the same time jeopardizing their comrade's limbs with stray bullets.

Taken in toto the scene was about as stirring as one as a man would wish to look upon.

The wounded jaguar was without a doubt raving mad, and could not see the opportunity of escape that offered through the open door, so that the only possible manner in which they could get rid of him was to kill him outright.

Like the famous Irishman's flea, when they thought they had him he wasn't there, and the shot intended for him went wide of the mark, possibly lodging in the calf of a doughty guerrilla and causing him to have a method in his madness as he pranced frantically about from one side of the apartment to the other.

The disorder increased instead of diminished. Men rolled over each other in their haste to get out of the animal's way whenever he made in their direction.

Those who clung to the face of the wall considered themselves very fortunate in being able to avoid this circus, though they watched the gyrations of the performers with great interest.

Louder swelled the tumult. If one jaguar let loose in a den of guerrillas could do such damage it became an interesting problem as to how many of the animals it would have needed to have entirely cleaned out the rest of the human vipers. It can be safely affirmed, however, that none of those participating in the engagement were interested in such a problem just then, as it began to seriously appear that this one brute would be able to accomplish all of this on his own individual account.

New cries now lent their power to swell the chorus.

No longer were the shouts those of excitement alone; pain and terror could now be traced in the loudest of the sounds, and one wretched fellow fairly shrieked as he felt the keen teeth of the fierce brute meet in his leg.

In its nature the jaguar somewhat resembles the bull-dog, in that having fairly gotten a grip hardly anything short of death will cause it to let go its hold.

The jaguar-hunters of Mexico and Central America know this full well, and when about to pit themselves in single-handed combat against one of the animals, they wrap up the left arm in an old poncho or blanket and offering this to the jaguar allow him to take hold and chew to his heart's content while they proceed to quietly insert a keen-edged *machete* back of his forelegs and sink it into his heart.

When the brute concerned in the present fracas got a firm hold upon the calf of a guerrilla's leg he held on firmly as though determined that not all the powers of things that lived and breathed should cause him to release his grip.

This was just the opportunity El Morte wanted.

He had dodged around with the rest of them, but had not once discharged his pistol since firing the shot that had brought the brute down among them, realizing how dangerous these shots were when fired with such haste, and while the jaguar was leaping madly this way and that.

Now, however, the case was altered, and he saw before him an opportunity to finish the whole business, at once ludicrous, exasperating and serious.

Leaping forward he thrust the barrel of a revolver he had secured since Little Texas had deprived him of his own, into the ear of the animal, and pulled the trigger.

There was a muffled report, a spring on the part of the jaguar, a wild yell from the man whose lacerated limb was rudely torn by the teeth of the animal being suddenly wrenched from their hold, and Mr. Jaguar fell over, quivering and kicking. A few more shots gave him his quietus beyond all peradventure.

He had made a gallant fight, and when the outlaws set to counting up the results of the *melee*, they found they had suffered a loss of one dead and three wounded as a result of the affair. The death of the animal was some consolation, and yet poorly offset their losses.

To add to their discomfiture more time had been given the fugitives.

Some of the men were of the opinion that those they sought could not have gone that way, for the presence of the jaguar seemed to forbid it; but wiser heads, among them El Morte's, knowing how the cliffs were honey-combed with natural passages, decided that the animal had probably been passed by them as he lay asleep in some offshoot or niche, and that issuing forth after they had gone by the brute had been just in time to see the first guerrilla crawl upon the ledge, and had gone for him with astonishing ferocity.

The pursuit was immediately organized, and a dozen guerrillas soon strode into the unknown passage, torches and weapons in hand.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TOMB OF THE MONTEZUMAS.

DUNCAN knew they were yet far from safe when he heard the rattle of bullets in the lofty dome of the vaulted chamber, although they had almost miraculously escaped from another danger that at the time had threatened to overwhelm them.

To leave the spot with as much speed as possible was uppermost in his mind, and while the fellow below upon whom the vampire bat had fastened itself was still howling his fright, Duncan and the brave border girl, hand in hand were groping their way along the unknown passage.

The darkness was almost equal to that Stygian gloom that fell upon benighted Egypt many centuries ago, when cruel Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel go—it could very nearly be felt, and had a peculiar effect upon the strained eyeballs, making them weary and painful.

They knew not what dangers beset their path, or what pitfalls they might run into, so their progress was necessarily very slow, as it was expedient that they make sure of their footing before taking a step in advance.

As they advanced the air grew still more musty.

Little Texas noticed it first, and remarked upon the fact to her companion. There seemed to be a palpable dust floating in the atmosphere, and to Duncan's uneasiness he no longer discerned the touch of fresh air fanning his cheek.

Unable longer to endure the agony of moving along in the dark in this manner, the Shark-Slayer called a halt.

From one of his capacious pockets he produced a candle of some length, such as are often used in the churches of Mexico, and burned to some favorite saint because of a vow made in time of danger or distress, and the sale of which adds to the church's revenue.

This he lighted with a lucifer match.

As the light flamed up the two cave fugitives looked curiously about them. They were in what was to all appearance a natural under-

ground passage, scores of which intersected the hills in the vicinity of San Miguel, where some loose deposit had in ages past been washed out by mysterious subterranean streams that had long since ceased to flow.

There was nothing singular about it only its size. Overhead in places dusty gray stalactites depended from the limestone arch above, and once in a while a stalagmite arose from the floor of the passage until the two met in mid-air, forming a column heavy at the top and base, while the center was exceedingly slender.

Here and there could be seen an opening on one side or the other. Some of these were mere cracks, while again others had the shape of smaller seams or passages, branches of the main one, which came to such a peculiar terminus in the vaulted chamber.

Duncan looked at each of these critically and tried to detect a faint breath of air issuing from any of them but without success. All around them was silent as the tomb. The tomb! ha! what was there in this atmosphere to make them think of the sepulcher!

It was about this time that the faint yells of the guerrillas came floating to their ears along the winding passage.

At first they thought these were the sounds of pursuit, and Duncan grasped his revolver more tightly, while his brow grew dark with sudden determination to give the human wolves reason to fear him if they came on too fast; but presently he realized something of the truth.

"Our enemies are fighting among themselves, or else have found a new enemy. If it were my brave fellows who had assaulted them, there would be heavier fighting than that and more powder burned. Come, let us go on, Little Texas."

They continued along the passage.

As they advanced, the musty state of the atmosphere became even more noticeable. Duncan seemed seized with a sudden idea, and he hurried along with such haste that his girl companion could hardly keep up with him.

Inside of two minutes they had reached the end of the passage.

It terminated in a wall, with only an opening some five feet in height. Beyond this was some great void—a cavern of some sort. Bats were everywhere. They had constantly whirled past them in the passage, and could be seen depending from projections in the roof at any and all quarters. The noisome creatures even darted through this opening going and coming, so that when the Shark-Slayer attempted the passage he was compelled to hold his arm up in order to protect his face, and at the same time prevent the light from being extinguished by the current of air produced by their wings.

Little Texas came close behind him.

Duncan strode to the middle of the cavern and then halting, raised the candle high above his head, while he looked eagerly around him.

Little Texas shrunk closer to his side.

She realized the truth. They were in a sepulcher of the dead!

Around them lay the dust of the Montezumas. Scattered here and there among the little dust-heaps were objects that shone in the candle-light. Here were golden ornaments and weapons that had been entombed with their exiled owners. While the tomb was open no doubt it had been zealously guarded, but after it was hermetically closed the secret of its existence had been lost, possibly, for centuries back.

Duncan's face expressed keen disappointment.

"It is not the one I knew of before, the secret of which many men would like to wring from my lips, but another tomb of the Montezumas. I had hoped it would prove that other, for then our escape would be an easy matter, as I knew the way of leaving it. Perhaps if I had taken time to think, I would not have had my hopes excited, for the one whose existence I was aware of before is further north."

"What are these shining things?" asked Little Texas.

"Pick one up and see," returned the pearl-diver, smiling.

She did so, not without a shudder, for it was plainly a heavy armlet, and the arm it had once encircled now formed a part of the little gray heap of dust near which the ornament had lain.

"Why, it's gold, I am sure!" exclaimed the girl.

"Without a doubt, Little Texas, and now you see why El Morte's men and he himself were anxious for my secret. I discovered the other tomb through finding a paper in a bottle I took from a shark's belly, and hid away all the golden ornaments I found in it, amounting to at least a hundred pounds of the pure article, for you see this ornament has crumbled along the edges, which shows there is no adulteration in it. Only one man knew my secret, and as he saw me hiding the stuff, I had to take him into my confidence. That man would have staked my secret against the gold of El Morte in the gambling den the other night, but I prevented him. He was killed in the *melee*, so now no man knows that secret but myself. Come, let us hide most of what you see here. The guerrillas

would glory in such a treasure, and I shall baffle their desire of gain as much as possible. Here is a yawning chasm over in this corner. Drop them down as quickly as possible. They may see our tracks upon the dusty rock and recover the treasure, but I doubt if they dare venture into the bowels of the earth, where hideous monsters may lie in wait."

While Duncan talked he worked, and the ornaments went down into the black chasm in a golden stream. In this way it did not take long to clean out the treasure of the old sepulcher.

"Hundreds of years gone by, that doorway through which we entered was sealed up so as to make this tomb air-tight, and when in that condition, the bodies of these lying here were as natural as when placed here, even though a hundred years had passed since their sepulture, but a breath, or the slightest touch of a finger would cause them to fall instantly into dust. As the ages rolled on, the cement holding the stones together crumbled away, and at last they fell as you see them there when we entered. I have no doubt but that when those rocks fell, everybody in this place instantly crumbled into dust, losing even the mockery of a semblance to humanity which they possessed up to the time this chamber was no longer air-tight. Another minute and our work is done. These cavities along the walls are the tombs of great men. See what human ambitions come to, Texas; for a day we strut upon the stage of life, and then we sink into oblivion and go back to Mother Earth."

Thus Duncan talked and moralized as he gathered the last armful of golden treasures from the tombs hewn in the wall.

The ancient method of burial was no doubt first embalming and then burying in this air-tight tomb, finally hermetically sealed in some manner. That the ancients understood the art of embalming better than we do to-day, is evidenced in the presence of the mummies of the pyramids and tombs of Egypt, where they have lain from the days of the Ptolemies, possibly three thousand years.

Just as Duncan was in the act of tumbling this last load of golden treasures into the abyss, he was startled by a movement near by.

Had the guerrillas already arrived?

He turned hastily in that direction, ready for action, but the alarm was a false one, and was only caused by a bat which, in its fluttering terror in sweeping through the opening, had brushed a projecting stone which had been threatening to fall for some time, and the result had been a rattle and bang as it went down.

Convinced that there was no present danger, Duncan once more picked up the ornaments he had dropped, and sent them after the others down the abyss.

He had just succeeded in removing their tracks in some degree from along the edge of the chasm, that had probably opened up since the tomb was made, when a word of caution from Little Texas drew his attention.

The brave girl stood at the opening listening, and he hurried to her side.

Along the passage came a confused murmur, and this he knew must proceed from the advancing guerrillas.

Handing the candle to Little Texas he hastily directed her to make a speedy search for some means of leaving the sepulcher, the discovery of which she was to communicate to him by means of a whistle long used as a signal between them.

Upon himself devolved the task of halting the *salteadores* and holding them at bay until she had prosecuted her share of the work and found a means of retreat.

With an encouraging word between them they separated, he to face the whole of the guerrilla gang, she to search for some means of going beyond the tomb of the Montezumas.

Duncan sprang through the opening and ran hastily down the passage to where it made an abrupt bend. Ere he reached this he could see a faint reflection upon the wall, and knew that the enemy was not far off.

Crouching down he peered around the corner.

Sure enough, some little distance down the corridor he saw a crowd of rough-looking men advancing, waving torches above their heads and shouting as they pushed forward, evidently with the intention of alarming those they sought, and possibly of scaring off a second dreaded jaguar should one be hiding in their course.

They were as ugly and desperate a crowd of ruffians as ever the eye of man fell upon, and any one might well be pardoned for feeling a thrill pass through his frame as he realized that they sought his life and that of one dear to him.

"They come, the cursed hounds, like wolves on the trail of a wounded deer. See how they wave their torches and howl as they advance. Let them come. I will give them a warm reception," and he gritted his teeth bitterly as he fingered the two revolvers he held.

The guerrillas continued to advance along the passage, until they were quite close to where Duncan crouched.

He believed that the time had come for him

to check their advance, and throwing forward the two weapons he pulled both triggers.

The result was a sudden consternation among the guerrillas. Whether he hit any of them or not Duncan could not say the commotion was so great, but he was hardly the man to miss his aim.

Shot after shot he sent among them, until the torches were one and all hastily extinguished. Even then he fired several more balls at random in answer to the volley sent by the guerrillas, to let them know he was alive and ready for business.

Complete darkness now rested upon the scene, and the silence was really oppressive, as the only sound that could be heard was the whirring of numberless bats' wings as they winged their apparently aimless flight overhead.

The guerrillas had received another check, but they were now in a mood that would not stand at trifles, and ere long they might hit upon some means of forcing the passage.

Duncan crouched there grim as fate, determined that the rocks around him should sooner fly from their places than he.

He knew that the guerrillas were stealthily crawling toward him with their bodies flattened against the floor of the corridor, and taking advantage of everything that came in their way in the line of cover, in order to protect them from any random shots that might be made by the enemy.

This he felt without there being any sound to indicate it. Before him rested Egyptian darkness—impenetrable, impressive, and profound. Through that gloom he endeavored to strain his vision, but the attempt to pierce it was perfectly useless, as he knew it would be even while making the attempt.

Affairs were rapidly assuming a desperate phase with the Shark-Slayer. With the whole of his foes creeping upon him, he could not hope to escape their wrath when once they reached his side, as they must do in an exceedingly short space of time.

At one moment he even believed he heard heavy breathing in close proximity to him, but immediately realized that this was simply fancy, as it was utterly impossible that any of the outlaws could have crawled over more than half the ground, at the slow rate of progress they must have been making in order to avoid all noise.

Thank Heaven! the whistle, at last.

Little Texas had found what they sought—a means of escape from the great sepulcher, other than the main passage. That signal had been associated with several important events in the past, and now it would be remembered in the future for one more cause.

Before leaving his post the Shark-Slayer discharged his revolvers several times down the passage, aiming low, but this was done more in order to let the desperadoes believe he was still at his post than with a desire to diminish their number in any degree.

Having thus faithfully discharged his duty in every sense of the word, Duncan replaced one of his revolvers, and reloading the other with fresh cartridges as he went, made for the cavern tomb.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOT-PRESSED.

DUNCAN found Little Texas impatiently awaiting him.

She still held the candle in her hand and stood before an opening in the face of the rock that looked more like a crevice opened by some convulsion of nature than one of the natural passages with which the hills were seamed.

"This is our only chance. I know not whither it leads, but the air at its mouth seems purer than that elsewhere, and you can see there is a decided draught here."

Saying which she called his attention to the flame of the candle which was blowing hither and yon, as though fanned by some gentle zephyr which they could not feel upon their cheeks.

Duncan was satisfied.

This was at least a chance, and they could ask no better, but if they were wise they would lose no time regarding their departure from the spot they then occupied, for it was more than probable that in five minutes, possibly less, the guerrillas would have possession of the cavern tomb, and it was of vital importance that ere this came the fugitives, with their light, should have passed entirely from sight.

So they started off without any further delay, Duncan carrying the light, and Little Texas reloading his other revolver for him as they wended their way along.

Their route was far from being easy. In places the ascent was very marked so that they had to climb as though making their way up the side of a steep hill.

Every little while they would halt and watch the flame of the candle, and at no time were they disappointed, for the light flickered in a way that positively announced their drawing near an opening of some sort. It was not long before they began to feel the delicious freshness of the atmosphere upon their cheeks, so that assurance was thus made doubly sure.

Not a sound was to be heard from the rear. Whatever their enemies were doing they kept silent, and this lack of noise was no proof that the pursuit was not being vigorously carried out. Duncan found time, now and then, to cast a glance over his shoulder, but he was agreeably disappointed in not being able to catch any signs of the men-wolves he knew were hot upon their trail.

The Vultures may have delayed some time in the cavern sepulcher in order not only to examine into matters but at the same time to discover by what manner of means the fugitives had left the place, for since it was only after considerable trouble that Little Texas had found the narrow passage which they were even then threading, it was to be presumed that the outlaws would experience just as much difficulty in hunting it up.

At one place it looked as though their further progress was barred, the passage assumed such narrow proportions, but as the draught had become such that it came very near extinguishing the candle, Duncan still had hopes of a successful issue.

He crawled forward through the narrow slit, and was extremely gratified when he emerged from this species of tortuous passage known in celebrated caverns as Fat Man's Misery, and once more was enabled to stand erect.

Through all, Little Texas had kept close by him, uttering not one word of complaint though difficulties beset the way. More than once the Shark-Slayer put out his strong arm and assisted her, for the events of this wonderful night had done much to tax her strength, and on such occasions she had rewarded him with a sweet smile that went straight to his heart.

At last they came to the end of the great crevice.

The opening was small, but such a current of air forced its way through that the candle was suddenly extinguished, just as it was on its last legs, having burned low down.

They no longer needed it, however.

Through the opening they could see the stars shining in the blue dome of heaven, and hear the breeze murmuring among the pines of the mountains.

Duncan crawled out of the crevice and then assisted his fair companion to gain the fresh air. The night had advanced since we saw him sliding down the rope on the face of the cliff, but it was not so dark as had been promised at the time. Seeing quite a number of heavy stones near by Duncan spent a few minutes in rolling many of them into the hole from whence he and his companion had just emerged, so as to clog it up and render the task of gaining an exit by that means a difficult one for the guerrillas to accomplish.

They were not a very great distance away from the arm of the sea that cut the land, and although Duncan had traversed such lengths underground, he could have reached this spot from the top of the cliff in five minutes or so.

Had his comrades arrived?

He raised his hands to his mouth and gave a shrill whistle that rung over the neighboring country for half a mile around.

Eagerly he listened.

The night breeze continued to play hide and seek with the branches of the trees overhead, from the water came faint sounds such as he had heard before—the cry of the loon and the calls of swans and geese, while the distant but distinct scream of a mountain-devil or jaguar, prowling about in search of prey, told how full of danger were the forests and chaparrals of the coast range after night had once cast her mantle over the earth.

All these Duncan heard, but not the answering signal for which he was straining his ears to catch.

Again he uttered the shrill whistle and once more listened, but the result was far from satisfactory.

Something had occurred to detain his friends, and only one course remained open to them. The guerrillas would soon be at the opening, and to remain longer at that point was foolhardiness. As he knew the topography of the country fairly, at least, it was to be expected that he could reach San Miguel with Little Texas.

They started off.

There was a freshness in the air that was peculiarly invigorating to them after their enforced stay underground, and especially since they had been breathing the musty atmosphere that seemed to hang in the cavern tomb of the ancients, and as they walked along they quaffed large draughts of the delicious, life-giving vapor.

Both of them seemed to no longer feel weary and worn, but became fresh and active as though they had drunk some magic elixir of life.

Duncan did not estimate the dangers that still hung around him too cheaply.

The chief of the outlaws was a man with a long head, and when, after the encounter with the jaguar in the boudoir, he realized that in all probability there was a chance of the fugitives escaping, he sent a dozen men into the unknown passage after those who had escaped his fury, while with the others El Morte sought the outside world to watch for Duncan and Little Texas.

Even when the two hunted ones emerged from the crevice, there was at least a score of their foes not far away, scattering through the pine woods, and pushing their way through the prickly pears and cacti forming the chaparral, regardless of the thorns in their eagerness to discover those who had incurred their anger.

They heard the signal whistles which the Shark-Slayer sent forth, and although not aware of the character of those who gave utterance to them, yet it was evident that the sounds needed an investigation, so they began moving in that direction.

Before Duncan had gone a hundred yards he realized that there were enemies about.

Their signals came from all directions, from the forests on his right and the stretch of prairie-land on his left, while even in the more distant chaparral bordering the level country he heard evidences of their presence.

The situation was just about as alarming as it had been while he and Little Texas were underground, but although he feared the worst, he tried to conceal the gravity of their situation from the girl in the hopes of saving her trouble.

Little Texas was a girl of the forest and prairie however; since a little girl she had been accustomed to reading the signs so full of meaning to old hunters, and Duncan could not himself catch the sense of any sound more quickly than she.

Besides, his face was to her a mirror upon which were reflected his thoughts, and try as he would to appear cheerful, she could read the fears that were troubling him, upon his countenance. When she saw Duncan quietly, and apparently without hardly knowing what he was doing, let his hand fall upon the butt of one of his revolvers, she fully realized the gravity of the situation.

At any moment discovery might come, for it was as though they were passing through a gantlet, with concealed enemies on either side, and if they could run the race unseen escape was no longer simply possible but probable.

This was not to be.

The eventful night was yet to be marked with events that would never be forgotten.

Suddenly a man appeared in front of them, rising from the bushes like a jack-in-the-box. He seemed surprised at first, but this feeling quickly gave way, and from his throat burst a loud shout.

It was the last sound he ever gave utterance to.

The revolver Duncan had snatched from his belt gave forth its sharp summons, and throwing up his arms the guerrilla sunk in a lifeless heap to the ground.

Already had the mischief been done, however. Even as the two fugitives sprung away in haste they heard the signal cries of the guerrillas more fiercely than ever, and they seemed converging toward the spot from whence the alarm had come.

"We are beyond their lines, I believe," aspirated Duncan in a hoarse whisper, as holding the hand of Little Texas he ran on, "but in five minutes' time they will be in hot pursuit. If caught we will meet no mercy, for I have not spared the cowardly dogs."

CHAPTER XIV.

CROSS TIMBERS.

WHEN it became a positive fact that they had left their foes behind them, Duncan's spirits arose, for he did not apprehend that they would have much trouble from this time on.

The darkness of the night, intensified under the trees would prevent the keenest-eyed guerrilla from seeing their trail, and as long as this remained a mystery to the enemy they were absolutely powerless to follow the fugitives.

Duncan was mentally congratulating himself upon having come out of the dangers of the night with so much credit, when his thoughts in this respect received a rude check.

Upon the still darkness of the night there suddenly rung out a sound that sent a spasm of alarm through his frame.

Was it the howl of a hungry gray wolf, or the harrowing scream of puma or jaguar?

Duncan knew them too well to make any such mistake; no animal of the forest had given vent to that long-drawn, blood-curdling bay that ended in a yelp. It was the cry of a hound that had been placed upon the trail.

Others joined in the chorus until the woods in their rear echoed and re-echoed with the sounds.

They recalled the previous night when Duncan had heard the baying and yelping in the woods and mentally pitied the poor wretch whom the Vultures of the Coast were hunting with their fierce dogs, little dreaming at the time that the fugitive flying in fear before the awful brutes was Little Texas, and that it was through her love for him that she had thus incurred the anger of the guerrillas.

Now the same beasts were upon her trail again, but this time she was not alone—Duncan was with her, and although when the dread sound first broke upon her hearing Little Texas shuddered and her hand clutched the arm of her companion nervously, yet immediately after she assumed a brave front.

The Sea-Diver gritted his teeth and looked back over his shoulder though of course he hardly expected to see anything. To his surprise several lights gleamed among the trees. These were constantly increasing in number and moved about, now advancing and anon swallowed up entirely to reappear presently in another quarter.

There was no mystery about them.

The procession of ghostly lights that grew in number was only composed of torches in the hands of the guerrillas. The fugitives were to be hunted not only by hounds but by fire.

They lost no time, but bounded away, keeping on the edge of the chaparral, as the ground was more even there, and they could run with less difficulty.

The chase grew hot.

Louder came the sounds of pursuit—the yelping and baying of the mixed pack of hounds, the shouts of men and their loud curses as they dashed along over every obstacle.

Duncan at length realized that they were slowly but surely being overhauled, though where the fault lay it was impossible for him to say, unless some of the guerrillas were runners of remarkable powers. It was enough for him to know the fact, and yet he could not see any reasonable remedy.

Both of them were panting heavily.

They could not keep up this pace a great while longer, even if their enemies gained no more upon them, for considering all that they had gone through, it was killing.

Better perhaps to turn and face the hounds. Then they could at least make an effort at self-defense, which would be utterly out of the question if they ran on much further.

Hark! what meant those sounds?

The yelps and baying had a new tone, and the cries of the men were both of anger and dismay.

"My God! the hounds have broken the leash. They will be on us inside of three minutes!" ejaculated Duncan.

Little Texas did not show any symptom of fear. Not a cry escaped her lips, her teeth were pressed firmly together and in one hand she firmly clasped the revolver of El Morte, which it chanced the cartridges Duncan carried just fitted, so that it was in a serviceable condition.

"Let us take to the timber here and wait for the dogs. Once they are out of the way we may have a better chance," she said.

At this point the timber and chaparral seemed to mingle and the latter became at least passable. In places the cacti and thorny pears were so dense as to impede progress, but avoiding such obstacles one could manage to progress with some rapidity, considering the devious path it was necessary to take.

The words of the border girl seemed to strike Duncan as just what was necessary under the circumstances, and without a word of comment he led the way into the timber.

Just at this particular place, years before, a tornado had swept along, so that hundreds of pines had dead branches hanging from their otherwise green fronts, while scores of trunks lay upon the ground, one crossed upon another. On the edge of the chaparral, much of which had sprung into existence since the cyclone spoken of, these tree-trunks were especially numerous so that they had the appearance of heavy and massive *chevaux-de-frise*, forming an obstruction which could have been utilized by a small body of determined men as a fort, and held against several times their number.

Duncan recognized the place as one known as Cross Timbers, because of the peculiar positions assumed by the fallen pines at this point in particular, though the effects of the devastating tornado could be seen for several miles in either direction.

Behind these logs, the two quickly took their places.

Revolvers in hand, they waited for the coming of the dogs that were rapidly drawing nearer with each passing second.

Brief as was the period elapsing between their gaining the shelter of the fallen timber and the arrival of their canine foes, the Shark-Slayer noticed several things. These were small in themselves, but they had a bearing upon their position, either at the moment or later on.

In the first place, he noticed that wind was constantly rising so that it was already whistling through the pine tops. This seemed a small thing to take note of, but his mind was just in the condition for such apparently trifling events to make impressions.

The other thing he realized was that in some unaccountable manner some of the guerrillas had managed to head off the pursuit, as their voices could be heard out upon the prairie on a level with the fugitives.

Knowing the country as they did, they were enabled to accomplish this by cutting across the section where those they hunted in following the line of timber made almost a half circuit.

It was therefore just as well that the fugitives had come to a halt when they did, for, in all probability, they would soon have been headed off anyway.

Not more than a minute passed ere the hounds

came up with a rush. They were, without a doubt, upon a hot scent and intended to be in at the death.

"Ready, Little Texas! Shoot to kill!" uttered Duncan.

"Don't fear for me; I am as steady as a rock!" she replied.

"I believe it, brave girl!" muttered the other.

The hounds were some half-dozen in number, and were a mongrel pack, with two full bloods to lead, two other savage monsters, and the remainder composed of half-breeds.

When they turned toward the timber their racket increased, for they discovered the presence of the fugitives. It was no pleasant sight to see that bloodthirsty pack leaping forward like mad wolves, and know that you were the object of their solicitude; but not a muscle or nerve in the set frame of the Sea-Diver quivered as he raised his two revolvers and threw them on a level.

Already that night had those faithful weapons done good service, and the chances were that they would do more yet ere the two fugitives had escaped the perils that threatened on every side to engulf them.

There was just light enough for a hasty aim, and one must have a sure eye to strike an object moving as rapidly as were the advancing hounds.

Half a dozen leaps carried the brutes to the outskirts of the fallen timber, where the first pine logs lay.

This was the point across which Duncan had drawn an imaginary line, which, when reached, would sound the doom of the leading brutes. He knew his girl companion well enough to be sure that she would not fire until he had given the signal with his own weapons, and therefore had not said a word to her in this respect.

It was a marked peculiarity that the hounds had now changed their manner of giving tongue, and only short, eager yelps broke from them as they whirled along their mad career, their glaring eyes fastened upon the two human figures that were crouched behind the crossed logs.

Even the guerrillas understood what was taking place from this sign, and ceased their shouts the better to learn how the affair came out, although they undoubtedly continued to advance as rapidly as possible, hoping to be in at the death, if such a thing were within the bounds of reason.

Another leap—it was the last!

From among the pine logs there sprang out two jets of flame, and the reports of Duncan's revolvers almost blended, followed in another second by a single shot.

Forward rushed the dogs.

Their number was lessened by two now, and even one of the savage quartette that leaped over the first log had an ugly wound along his side where one of Duncan's bullets had plowed up the flesh, coming within an ace of being fatal.

Again the line of fire flashed out—it was the fire of death—and once more the reports sounded, this time bunched together, for Little Texas having but one weapon to handle, managed to get it in readiness as soon as Duncan brought both of his revolvers into line.

So close were the dogs this time that the fire from the muzzles of the revolvers burned their hides. Under such circumstances to miss was an impossibility with persons of grit and experience handling the "barkers," and as a consequence three of the dogs keeled over with yelps of pain and dismay, almost at the feet of brave Duncan and his equally valiant girl comrade.

This left but one canine foe.

He was the wounded hound, one of the leaders, and a terrible brute for any one man to tackle. There was no time to even draw back the hammer of a revolver, for he was coming straight as an arrow for the Shark-Slayer, his gleaming eyes and distended jaws giving him a fearful appearance even in the semi-gloom.

Duncan, after firing, did not even attempt to use his weapons, but let them fall from his hands.

Then instantly bracing himself he clutched the hound by the throat with both iron hands and stayed his flight through the air.

The scene that followed was one of thrilling import. Man and brute struggled for the mastery. Strong as the Shark-Slayer was, he had all he could do to keep the ugly teeth of the tawny monster away from his throat. As it was, only a few inches lay between and he could actually feel the hot, fetid breath of the giant brute upon his face.

A slip of the hands and the cruel teeth that snapped with such horrible anticipation close to his neck would be buried in the flesh. In vain Duncan attempted to hurl the hound from him; the brute seemed gifted with amazing strength, and to the eyes of the Shark-Slayer his ugly head was rapidly assuming the appearance of a devil.

The man was panting now; his strength though beyond that of most men, was waning before the fiend-like fury of the giant hound and in another minute the latter promised to have it all his own way.

Some one else had a say in this, however.

Little Texas had sent another shot into one of the dogs that wounded unto death was still trying to get at her, when, upon turning she discovered the terrible position of affairs.

The silver-mounted revolver of El Morte was pressed hastily against the side of the brute, just back of the foreleg that rested upon Duncan's shoulder; then there was a muffled report, and the pearl-diver hurled the stricken brute from him just in time to save his arm from his frenzied, snapping, dying bite.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHAPARRAL FIGHT.

HASTILY snatching up his two weapons the Shark-Slayer was ready for fight.

"Into the timber, Texas; it is our only hope!" he gasped, having lost his breath to some extent in his recent encounter.

The yells of the bandits had now broken out afresh, and they seemed to come from almost every side, as though the guerrillas had succeeded in enveloping them in a trap. It was evident from this outburst of rage that El Morte and his rascally followers understood the position of affairs. Indeed, they could believe nothing else for the stillness that had followed the assault of the bounds was terribly suggestive, not a howl being heard after the report of the girl's revolver had rung out upon the air.

Into the timber they went.

Their progress was now much less rapid than when they were upon the open prairie, but they still found much to be thankful for. The dreaded hounds had been placed *hors de combat*, and could no longer threaten to bring the guerrillas down upon them no matter how strenuous their efforts at escape.

It was soon determined that their foes had not been paralyzed by the death of their dogs, but were apparently redoubling their efforts to surround the fugitives and cut off all chance of escape.

That they were successful in this was due for the most part to their knowledge of the ground, for Duncan lost much time in stumbling this way or that in the darkness.

What was to be done?

They were encompassed on all sides by the enemy, and it could only be a matter of time when they must meet the guerrillas in battle array.

Through the gloomy chaparral timber the *salleadors* would come creeping, and the first they might know of their presence would be a treacherous shot from the rear; or they might come rushing forward in overwhelming numbers, and crush the panting fugitives beneath their feet.

The success already attained by having a cover from behind which they could fight, induced the Shark-Slayer to look around him for something of a similar nature to be used in the expected assault from human foes.

Could they hold their own in any way until morning came, a rescue by the pearl-divers of San Miguel was certain.

How this was to be done was the puzzle.

Again Little Texas was of service to him. Learning what he was looking for, she reminded him that just a little piece back they had passed the very place that would suit them—a great heap of logs on the bank of a stream where the trees grew somewhat more densely than was the case in most of the section around.

Back they hurried to this spot.

Duncan had hardly given it a fair look when they first passed by, his thoughts being in another direction, but now he was forced to admit that it was admirably suited to their purpose.

The logs were plentiful enough to form a barricade, and from their appearance it actually looked as though they had been used at some time for such a purpose.

They lay in the shape of a triangle, with one point toward the creek; and by crouching behind them, one could find the best shelter imaginable. From the nearness of the signal cries it was evident that they had not reached this point of shelter a minute too soon.

Behind the logs they waited with ready revolvers and bated breath, just as they had done a short time before at Cross Timbers, only their adversaries in the present instance were human brutes instead of four-footed ones.

Nearer came the signals.

The guerrillas were closing in, confident that they had the two fugitives in the toils, and with a pretty well defined idea as to where they were to be found, for they had had something to do with the affair that had taken place at this point a year or so ago.

Duncan was watching eagerly, ready to use his revolvers at the first opportunity, while Little Texas also pierced the semi-gloom with her bright eyes, in order to note the coming of the foe.

"See!" she whispered suddenly, "over yonder by the great tree. What is that stirring? Is it a man or a branch?"

Duncan raised his revolver and then lowered it again, while he keenly scrutinized the object which his companion had pointed out to him.

Then he started violently, looked again, and hastily said:

"Don't mind it, Little Texas. It is a swinging branch, no doubt. See how regular the motion is. Look elsewhere, child, and let me know when you sight one of the wolves."

She saw that for some reason he did not want her to look longer at the mysterious swinging object, and although filled with a natural curiosity to know what it could be, she obeyed his request, and looked elsewhere for their foes.

It was not long before she made another discovery, and this time, when Duncan's attention was called to the moving object, he had no difficulty about recognizing a skulking guerrilla.

The fellow was advancing, dodging from tree to tree as though he knew that the darkness was not dense enough to hide him entirely from the view of a watchful enemy, and that the pearl-diver could be placed in this category, their experience with him proved beyond a doubt.

Knowing that his presence must be made known to the foe sooner or later, and preferring to open the ball in a manner that would redound to his credit, Duncan held a weapon in readiness to cover the fellow, and then waited until he came a trifle nearer.

Just as Little Texas whispered that she had discovered another of the guerrilla gang advancing in the same manner from the opposite direction, the Shark-Slayer pulled trigger.

A flash, a report that rung through the chaparral—that was the immediate sequence, though the bowl of sudden pain, bursting from the wretch who received the leaden pill, cut short the crackling sound of the quick discharge.

There was commotion in the cacti, and then the sounds of a hurried retreat. One guerrilla, at least, had obtained his full share of the fight, and was making tracks for safer quarters.

When the Sea-Diver turned to pay his respects to the other one who had been discovered by Little Texas, he found that the fellow had vanished, having thrown himself into the midst of a clump of bushes, from whence he could see the rude stockade without himself being seen.

That a general attack would be made upon their quarters there could be no doubt, and from the various signals that sounded through the wood, it might be safely determined that this would not be delayed any length of time.

All they could do was to wait, possessing their souls in patience, and when the rush came, pour in such a shower of leaden missiles that the outlaws would shrink back appalled.

The minutes seemed like hours, such was the uncertainty that hung over them, and soon the Shark-Slayer began to wish the assault would hasten, the suspense was so exasperating.

It was strange, the impression made upon him by the wind. He had marked its growing strength, and with each gust a peculiar, indescribable sensation passed over him, as though he could detect in the wild surging a requiem for the dead.

The presence also of that swinging object under the tree, seemed to annoy Duncan not a little, and several times he cast covert glances in that direction, which, however, he took especial pains Little Texas should not notice.

During the five minutes that ensued, the guerrillas managed to creep up on all sides, until they surrounded the little triangular stockade of logs. Then the voice of El Morte was heard giving some order. Duncan and his companion caught its import and dropped behind the logs, completely sheltering their bodies.

This was just done in time, for the guerrillas opened fire with revolvers and guns, and the bullets hummed and whistled right merrily over the heads of the recumbent fugitives, while still others beat a lively tattoo upon the logs which sheltered them.

Only for a minute or less was this fusilade maintained.

Then the voice of El Morte was heard, broken with curses, commanding a cessation of the wild firing unless they wished to wipe each other out of existence.

In thus opening upon the stockade, the guerrillas, being upon all sides, overshot their mark in the dusky state of the forest, and the bullets from over the way began to hurtle among their own number in a manner far from agreeable.

One of them had in fact chipped out a piece of flesh from the captain's flank, and it was this that had brought out from him the cry to cease firing.

The question now to be settled, was whether the fusilade had been harmful to those who were behind the logs, and the only way to find out was to make a charge.

When the order was given, the bandits sprang from their various places of concealment, and hastily forming into two bands, rushed forward with a tremendous outburst of enthusiasm. They would have done better had they advanced in the manner in which they had been lying, as the two whom they meant to assault could not well turn their attention in a dozen different quarters at once.

The attack was one of spirit, but the men

were not as brave as they might be. Such fighting was not in their line. They could endure a struggle with men of the same caliber as themselves, but this pearl-diver was a devil, whose equal did not exist according to their way of thinking, and when the incessant flash of fire burst from the stockade, and the bullets cut and whistled and hewed a way through their ranks, they were demoralized.

Dare-devils among Mexicans are rare specimens—the race is below the ordinary in warlike spirit, and it was not to be wondered at that the bandits broke before the fierce fire to which they were now subjected, and fled like sheep frightened by the sudden appearance of the wolf.

In vain El Morte called upon them to stand firm—at the same time making certain to keep his own precious body out of sight. The guerrillas had become too badly demoralized, and it was astonishing to note the mysterious manner in which they vanished from view in the surrounding gloom.

The little battle was over.

Duncan and his girl ally had not as yet received a scratch, while they must have inflicted considerable damage among their enemies during the encounter.

The Shark Slayer was astounded at the bravery exhibited by Little Texas. He had always known that she could face the dangers of the forest, but that she should stand beside him in this manner and meet an attack from a dozen desperate men was something surpassing belief.

"Little Texas, you are the best friend man ever had. I would rather have you by me in a fight than any man I ever met. God bless you, girlee. Twice you have saved my life. How can I ever re—"

"Hush, Duncan, how can you? Who was it entered the den of his mortal foes and faced thirty desperadoes to save me, this very night? God knows I owe life and everything to you many times over. Say no more about it I beg."

"Then I will not, Texas, if it hurts you, but you can't hinder me from thinking you are the dearest friend I have on earth."

He felt her hand tremble when he caught it, but at this moment their attention was directed to a point to windward of the rough little stockade behind which they crouched.

Lights had sprung up, one, two, three of them in so many different quarters. They flashed up brilliantly, climbing upward as though mounting ladders placed for their convenience.

Were the bandits signaling for help?

The two fugitives watched for several minutes, and during this time the flames had leaped from one tree to another, and were advancing like race horses.

"Great Heaven!" cried Duncan, "they have set fire to the woods and chaparral and mean to burn us out!"

It was true.

The guerrillas had applied the torch in a dozen places and the flames had run up the hanging dead limbs spoken of before like magic, making pillars of fire that were driven by the wind into the next trees.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHIN THE FIRE-TRAP.

THE situation was terrible enough to appall the stoutest heart, and Duncan might well be pardoned when a shudder ran through his frame. He was thinking more of Little Texas than himself. She had passed through enough perils to have broken down many a strong man, and yet she gave no sign of weakening.

Feeling the shudder that shook the frame of the pearl-diver, and knowing he was thinking more of her than himself, she sought to encourage him with words of cheer.

"See how brave I am, Duncan. Count upon me just as though I were a man. We are in terrible danger, but with the help of God we'll baffle the fiends yet. Be yourself, Duncan, and I am sure you can think of some plan whereby we may escape the awful doom hanging over us."

Her words put new life into the man.

He pressed her to his breast in a transport, murmuring:

"God bless you, Little Texas; what would I do without you?"

Then his mind was bent upon the situation, and it was certainly serious enough to demand his full attention. The woods and chaparral were now burning on all sides of them, the fierce wind fanning the flames eagerly, until they roared and leaped from tree to tree like terrible animals in great pain.

Upon the ground under the pines was a bed of resinous matter, the decayed frondage of perhaps centuries, and at least half a foot in thickness. This offered a splendid material upon which the fire could feed, as it was the dry season, and the springy mass was in the finest possible condition for a blaze.

The flames ran up the broken and dead limbs of the trees, seized upon the undergrowth, and fed on the abundant matter that lay upon the ground, so that there was no lack of fuel.

When the fire had gotten fully started, even

the green frondage and wood of the pines seemed to offer little or no resistance to their fierceness. The flames shriveled up all foliage until it was dry, and when the fire had passed by these trees stood out like grim specters, blazing and smoking in patches, and destitute of anything in the way of covering.

There could be no doubt but that the guerrillas were still hanging in most directions back of the flames. One quarter alone was probably free from them and this the point toward which the wind was driving the flames. There could be no hope for them in this quarter, for the fires started on opposite sides were eating their way together, and it would have been madness to have made the attempt.

A glance around at the situation was very disheartening, for there seemed to be no possible chance of escape from the impending doom.

Little Texas uttered a gasp of horror, and pointed to the great tree under which a little while before they had seen the mysterious white object swinging.

The fire had not yet reached this point, but the whole vicinity was illuminated by the glare of the burning chaparral, and there could be no mistaking the nature of this strange object now.

It was a skeleton dangling there, held together in spite of the ravages of time. A rope suspended it from a limb of the tree, and its ghastly outlines were vividly depicted by the surrounding fire.

Underneath the tree lay a heap of bones—all that was left of another skeleton figure, for a portion of a rope dangling alongside the swaying phantom told that two men had been hung here.

No words were necessary to tell Duncan the story. At some time in the past, possibly a year, the guerrillas had assailed these two men in the chaparral, and they had defended themselves bravely, as the presence of the triangular fort of logs proved, but overcome finally by stress of numbers, they had fallen into the hands of their bitter foes, who, merciless as tigers, had not spared them, but had hung them because of their bravery—a warning to all fools who would dare resist the Vultures of the Coast.

The sight was ghastly at this hour of peril.

Duncan had guessed the nature of that swaying form when he had seen it through the semi-gloom, which accounted for the hasty manner in which he had drawn the attention of Little Texas to another quarter. During the interval which had elapsed he had entirely forgotten all about the matter until the girl's gasp of horror informed him that she had discovered all.

Duncan knew that exposure would no longer bring a shot, as the guerrillas were beyond the walls of fire, watching to see if by any miracle they should manage to break through, when it was their full intention to shoot them down like dogs.

He therefore led the way out of the little stockade.

The air was hot around them, and rapidly becoming stifling, as space after space was seized upon by the fire-fiend, and added to the general holocaust. Two dead guerrillas lay upon the ground, but the men of El Morte had carried their wounded off with them when it had been decided to fire the chaparral, so that with the exception of the two corpses and the remains of those unfortunate victims of the Vultures, Duncan and his girl companion were alone in the doomed tract.

Animal and bird and reptile life was swarming about them.

Deer dashed into view, though how they got within the fire-circle was a mystery, since it would be supposed that the battle preceding the firing of the chaparral would have frightened away such timid animals from the vicinity.

Birds screamed and fluttered among the trees overhead, or sped through the air in the endeavor to escape the fire and smoke; snakes and lizards glided along the ground, hissing their rage at such a disturbance. Through the bushes a bear broke, snarled at sight of the two standing there, but made no attack, turning shortly to one side and plunging out of sight again. Foxes and wolves also slunk this way and that in numbers. No one would have believed that the chaparral within the confines of the fire walls contained such a multitude of animals that were driven to the central point where the rude triangular stockade lay.

This way and that the Shark-Slayer rushed, holding the hand of his young companion, but it was only to be baffled each time.

The intense heat turned them back—it was death to attempt to push a passage through that fearful barrier, and yet was it not death to remain where they were?

Each time they came back to the vicinity of the stockade they found it less endurable. From three sides the fire was advancing, eating its way in on two, while from the third direction it was booming along with a thunderous roar.

The animals and reptiles seemed thicker than ever, but this was because they too had been turned back on all sides, and the space they occupied was gradually decreasing so that they were now being congregated about the stockade.

They were dazed by the splendor of the scene, and seemed incapable of any venom. Even the bear and the jaguar that had been caught within the fire-trap moved restlessly about, not venturing to attack each other and even seeing Duncan and Little Texas within a dozen yards of them with only a half-growl half-whine.

Each moment the scene became more appalling.

The crash of trees could be heard above the roaring of the flames, and the air was full of myriads of sparks that falling on the dry combustible matter lying around, started dozens of incipient conflagrations round about, that were soon to be swallowed up in the mighty billow of flame sweeping onward with resistless power.

Little Texas clung to the Shark Slayer.

"At least we can die together, dear Duncan. Thank Heaven for that!" she had cried, so that he could hear her voice above the roar of the fire tempest and the howls and snarling of the doomed animals.

"Ay, but it is bitter to think of your young life going out in such a terrible way. Heaven is cruel," he groaned.

"Hush!" she said, "God knows best. If He wills that we should live, there will be means of escape be offered us. We must bow our heads to the decree."

The man looked as though his present mood would lead him to defy fate and Providence, but the words of Little Texas had some effect upon him, and he stifled a curse as he looked down upon the little figure nestling in his arms, and thought of the sublime courage that could enable a girl to look such horror calmly in the face.

It was now a difficult matter to even breathe.

They crouched low near the ground, for the air was fresher there and less impregnated with the smoke that was rolling in heavy volumes through the wooded chaparral.

More than one of the animals had found this out, for they were flattened out upon the earth with their noses thrust down at the roots of some tree, but this would not save them.

Escape there was none. Doom had apparently come upon them and the burned chaparral would be their grave. More fiercely came the on rushing flames, dancing and apparently mocking the agony of those whom they meant to destroy.

Nothing in this world can be more sublime and terrible than a forest on fire, and when this is supplemented by a chaparral growth below, the spectacle is beyond the power of description. Those who have ever witnessed anything of this kind will never forget it to their dying day.

Duncan had given up all hope. There was not an avenue of escape, and the fire in a very few minutes would be upon them, when the end must be death. His teeth were clinched and his eyes blood-shot. He glared about him like a wild beast, and yet he could conceive of no plan whereby they might have the least possible chance of escape.

The agony was fearful; it was wholly of the mind, for the body had not yet begun to suffer, although their faces were flushed and almost blistered with the terrible heat.

All seemed lost.

Duncan acknowledged this with a groan, and hid his face as though to shut out the terrible spectacle of approaching death; but stay, woman's wit came to the rescue.

The Shark-Slayer felt Little Texas jerk his arm and in his ear she cried in a voice totally unlike her own:

"Watch the bear!"

He raised his head and looked at Bruin sharply. The animal had tried in half a dozen ways to avoid the smoky heated air, hiding one moment under the leaves of a cluster of cacti plants and then flattening himself out along the earth.

This last position he had returned to, and when Little Texas directed the attention of her companion to the animal he had raised his head and was looking intently forward, snuffing the air at the same time.

What had attracted his attention? A wolf had skulked down to the edge of the little creek and was cooling his parched tongue by lapping up the water.

The bear quickly arose and ambled down to the side of the wolf. He snuffed the water but did not drink. To the surprise of the two who were watching he stepped into the stream and waded out until the water half covered him. In the fight consequent upon the burning of the chaparral Bruin had, possibly for the first time in his life, voluntarily entered the water.

Here and there along the course of the little creek were small basins formed by eddies when the stream was high, during the rainy season, and in these places, hitherto unnoticed by the two fugitives the water was of considerable depth.

Into one of these the bear had made his way, and now little beyond his head, was to be seen of his shaggy lordship.

Duncan uttered a shout.

"Saved, thank God! Saved, and to you once more, Little Texas, am I indebted for life," he cried.

"Nay, not to me, Duncan, but to the Power above that put that wonderful instinct into the head of Bruin yonder. But for the bear I should not have known that the creek was deep enough to cover a fox," returned the border-girl.

Not a minute was to be lost if they wished to avail themselves of the wonderful chance for self-preservation that now offered, for the billows of flame were so close that the hanging branches of the pines around them were taking fire, and Duncan could feel the intense heat through his garments.

They would yet cheat the fire-fiend of his prey.

CHAPTER XVII.

THROUGH THE BURNT CHAPARRAL.

THE water was deep enough for their purpose.

By bending down Duncan could submerge his whole tail form, and even duck his head under if the emergency should arise necessitating such a move.

As for Little Texas, her height being much less, standing there beside the comrade for whom she had suffered so many trials, the water was up to her chin.

The surly bear had growled as they entered his retreat, but Duncan had boldly moved toward him, revolver in hand, determined that Bruin must yield a portion of the pool to them, or suffer the consequences. Whether the shaggy monster had had a previous acquaintance with fire-arms, and feared the smell of gunpowder, or was naturally cowed by the presence of human beings cannot of course be known, but he yielded them room, moving along to the other side of the pool, though with a rather bad grace.

The air was now like a furnace.

On all sides raged the fire, and a perfect maelstrom of blazing brands were whirled through the air by the strong breeze that fanned the blaze.

Despite his dangerous position, Duncan found time to admire the weird scene, while Little Texas was awe-stricken by its grandeur.

A few of the animals had followed their example and crawled into the stream, where the cool water would save them much of suffering. Others with blunted instinct, remained upon the land until the terrible heat crazed them, when they could be heard rushing hither and thither, roaring madly, until the fire put an end to their sufferings.

When it became exceedingly warm for them both, they dashed water upon their heads, cooling them. Even the water finally lost its freshness, but before this occurred the worst of the danger was past.

The fire leaped from one tree to another as though chasing some invisible object that eluded its pursuit. From the earth to the tops of the pines the blaze was in places one solid wall. As though it were an army, the fire advanced with skirmishers thrown out on the flanks and ahead while the main column marched with irresistible power.

Nothing human could live in the course of that fiery whirlwind unless protected in some such manner as were our friends.

The fire would follow the track of the tornado where the fallen trees and debris offered fine food for the flames. Whether it would go beyond was a question, for while there was food for a blaze in the foot or so of decayed matter that lay everywhere, having fallen from the pines during the years past, the green density of the chaparral would check its flight, and eventually prevent the flames from finding fresh fuel.

There might come a means of extinguishing the fire even in a shorter period.

It had threatened rain before the coming of the fire-fiend, and the down-pour might now be hastened by the dense volumes of smoke arising, and the intense heat having a seductive tendency upon the low-hanging clouds.

Duncan cast many anxious glances upward whenever there appeared a rift in the clouds of smoke, and Little Texas soon discovered what he was longing for. Bravely had she kept by his side, surrounded by such fearful danger, and the Shark-Slayer was filled with unspeakable admiration for her remarkable heroism.

The worst was over.

When the billows of flame that had passed over the stream reached the place where the other fire had been started, there was little or no fuel for a continuance of the race, so it was given up.

The terrible roar that had almost deafened the two fugitives now died out of the immediate vicinity, though it could be heard some distance away, where the advance wave gathered new strength by feeding upon the fresh forests before it.

Still, all around them was fire. Trees burned in every direction, the flames creeping up their sides and playing hide and seek with each other along the blackened trunks.

Now and then a crash was heard as some pine, eaten through by the fire, went to earth a

complete wreck. Here and there a black tree stood solemnly outlined, smoking sullenly, yet refusing to burn, a grim sentry of the wood.

Along the ground the fire ran in great parallels, and it glowed and radiated with a heat which continually grew in intensity. Without rain to cool this natural oven, the earth would be fiery hot for hours, and there would be no passing over it.

All at once Duncan uttered a little cry.

"The rain, thank God, at last!"

Sure enough, when Little Texas turned her face upward, she felt the cooling drops plash upon it. The rain had indeed come, and now the fire-demon would be crushed.

Faster they descended, until quite a torrent was pouring down, and such a hissing as ensued. It was as if a tremendous nest of serpents had been aroused from their den—it was the fierce fight between those mortal foes, fire and water.

Slowly but surely the water conquered.

The flames grew less in volume, and soon all upon the blackened trees had been subdued. Because of the greater quantity of fuel upon the ground, that portion of the fight was more prolonged, but as the water continued to come down in torrents, it gradually got the upper hand.

As the fire became subdued, darkness once more settled over the forest, but it would not last long, as dawn was near at hand.

They could see objects indistinctly through the semi-gloom, and their attention was at length called to Bruin. The bear had become tired of his quarters in the pool, and uttering a series of grunts he finally made his way to the shore, but the rain had not yet fully put out the fires under the surface, and the old fellow speedily came bustling back to his former position with blistered paws to pay for his temerity.

Half an hour later, just as dawn was breaking, he made another attempt, and this time failed to return, from which indication Duncan was fain to believe that the rain had cooled the ground to a comfortable degree at least.

The rain had slackened by this time also.

Reaching the shore, the Shark-Slayer found his surmise correct, for the ground was well soaked, and though still warm in places, could be readily passed over.

An examination was now made in regard to their arms, for since the fire no longer raged, they might expect to meet their foes searching for the remains of their victims, and it would be wise to prepare, in advance, for their reception.

The cartridges, being water-proof, had probably suffered none because of their having been immersed so long, but, to make sure that the weapons were in serviceable order, Duncan fired a shot from each.

At the sound of the sharp reports there was a flurry among the few animals still remaining in the water, and away they scampered at full speed through the burned chaparral.

Duncan knew that the conflagration had only been local in its sweep, and that less than half an mile in the direction they wished to go they would come to the green chaparral again.

Neither of them had any love for the spot, though the presence of the pool had saved them from a cruel death. The hideous swaying skeleton no longer swung from the blackened limb of the tree: a heap of charred bones underneath was all that remained to mark the diabolical fury of the Coast Vultures.

They were soon moving along through the bleak scene, heading in a direction away from the den of the guerrillas, as it was natural to suppose that in this quarter they would run less chance of meeting any of their deadly foes.

Fire had lingered obstinately in a few quarters and here could be seen a little column of smoke rising from some specter tree whose heart still smoldered, while in another quarter a puff of flame would make its appearance from a pile of debris which even the soaking rain had failed to penetrate.

Through these scenes the two fugitives passed. The Shark-Slayer no longer presented such a dashing appearance—all that he had gone through on this night of nights, finishing with the evils of fire and water, had done much to damage his garments, but he was as fearless in spirit as ever, and walked boldly along with a springy step, every now and then casting a glance full of solicitude upon the young border girl at his side.

Heaven knows they had already seen adventure enough since Duncan's entry to the den of the guerrillas, but their trials were not yet over.

While they moved onward, there suddenly boomed out upon the murky morning air the heavy report of a gun, and Duncan even felt the bullet whistle past his ear, so close did it come.

At the same time he discovered moving forms in front, dusky figures that darted to and fro, as though desirous of keeping the trunks of the fire-bitten trees between themselves and the fugitives, at the same time scattering, fan-like, in order to encompass the two who had

thus been brought to a halt and prevent their escape.

Duncan had difficulty in repressing an oath.

Fate had once more thrown them in contact with the guerrillas, and the game of life and death must again be played, with the odds in favor of the enemy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HUMAN PANTHERS CREEPING ON THEIR PREY.

QUICK to act, Duncan drew his weapons.

He hesitated at first, as though undecided how to move, looked wistfully ahead at the dusky figures of the guerrillas darting from tree to tree, then at his fair companion, and shook his head.

Had he been alone just then, but one place would have suited his feverish condition, and satisfied that furious spirit of hatred for the men who were thus bounding him to the death. He would have braved all and rushed forward with a revolver in each hand, leaping from side to side to avoid the shots of his enemies, and woe to the desperadoes when once he was among them with that burning mood upon him.

This programme was now rendered impossible by the presence of Little Texas.

She seemed to divine that look of his.

"Do not hold back on my account, Duncan. If you go I will be at your side," she said, hastily.

"No," he replied, "we will try and fight them off for a time. My brave boys can not be far away, and the fire will have drawn them in this direction. Once they come up, Heaven help these devils, for that fiendish act of theirs has placed every man of them beyond pardon."

Having learned from experience what Duncan could do with the weapons he held, the guerrillas were chary about advancing. Their idea was to surround the two, and make sure there would be no escape, when they could keep watch and ward in the hope that some lucky shot might dispatch the Shark-Slayer, when a rush would settle the matter as far as the young girl was concerned.

The two fugitives sought shelter at once. This they found in a trio of large trees that grew in the shape of a triangle, and their attention was first called to them by a singular resemblance they bore in general shape to the rude stockade that had sheltered them on the previous night when the men of blood had made such a furious attack.

In the center of these trees they crouched.

One good thing the fire had done—it had made a clean sweep of the shrubbery in its path, so that desperadoes could not seek to advance by means of any such shelter. They must depend entirely upon the blackened trees, and these as has been stated were not so plentiful as they might have been before the tornado swept the forest.

Little Texas was a keen shot with the rifle, but not so good with a revolver, while Duncan was most at home with the latter weapon. They had a fair supply of ammunition, and it was therefore decided that Duncan was to send a bullet whenever he thought there was a chance of its being effective, while Little Texas at the same time would hold herself in readiness to reload the weapons as fast as they were discharged by her companion.

The guerrillas were yet some distance away but rapidly approaching, leaping from tree to tree and gradually drawing nearer the little triangle of pines where their enemies lay.

As yet Duncan had not fired a shot. He was waiting for a fitting opportunity, believing that the first bullet should carry death in its train.

The scene was a most remarkable one—the two hiding in the triangle of pines—the advancing guerrillas, exultant in the thought that they had their foes caged after all—the grim trees looking like so many ghouls in the gray dawn, with an occasional burst of flame from some spot where the fire lingered.

All these things went to make the spectacle a most extraordinary one, and yet in keeping with this strange country where singular things seem the order of the day.

Duncan's keen eyes were on the alert, and he was only biding his time. At length the opportunity he desired came, and he was ready to take advantage of it.

One of the guerrillas had gained a point only a little distance away from the triangle, and in his eagerness to get a shot at the fugitives, he carelessly exposed himself in making from one tree to another a few yards further on.

It was only for a second or two, and his passage through the intervening space was so quick, that hardly one man out of ten would have been able to have sent a bullet with such exactness as to have struck the flying figure.

The Shark-Slayer was that individual, however, and he knew the fate of the fellow even before he pulled trigger.

With the report, a yell awoke the dismal echoes of the fire-devastated forest, and the man, continuing his course, struck the tree he had been aiming for, heavily, after which he fell to the ground kicking in death agonies.

If any of the guerrillas had cherished an idea

that the fugitives had lost their weapons when hunted by the fire, because up to this time they had not fired a shot, that delusion vanished with the report of Duncan's revolver, and the shriek that broke from the lips of the stricken man.

After that the desperadoes were more careful in advancing, though they were compelled to expose themselves to some degree when breaking cover. They took advantage of every rising piece of ground which would afford them shelter, and from behind which they could lie and fire at the little fort composed of those three blackened trunks.

The firing seemed to have attracted more of the outlaws to the spot than had been engaged with them on the previous night, for they appeared to be in all quarters, and it was not long ere a shot coming from the rear told the Shark-Slayer that the surround was complete.

One of the three trees was hollow, and in this Duncan placed Little Texas in spite of her protestations. This gave him more sweep, and, at the same time, relieved his mind to some degree, respecting the flying bullets.

Now that they had him hemmed in, it was dangerous for the Sea-Diver to expose himself on any side, for such an act would cause a dozen guns and pistols to be discharged, and he could hardly hope to escape such a fusillade.

They did not know Duncan fully. When some of them, feeling it was now safe to advance, made an attempt to do so, they were met by a destructive fire that played havoc among their number. In vain they poured shot after shot into the tree-fort—so long as one of their number remained in sight he continued to send those death-winged missiles of lead.

Then came another lull. Little Texas was hardly to be kept in the cavity where Duncan had placed her, for she saw the blood trickling down one of his arms and knew he was wounded, but he quieted her by pronouncing it simply a flesh wound, and declaring that it did not hurt him a particle.

Every minute their situation was becoming more terrible, and there could be no telling how it would end, though the chances seemed to favor the guerrillas immensely.

Duncan was listening eagerly yet with little hope, expecting to hear some distant signal that would announce the coming of his comrades, the pearl-divers, but the time went by and this hoped-for signal was not given.

He was a man who never thought of giving up so long as a grain of hope or an atom of life remained, and even when he was forced to the conviction that the chances of his friends arriving in time was slight indeed, still he would not despair.

His teeth were clinched, his eyes blazing, and his hands gripped the two revolvers he held with a clutch that meant death to the guerrilla who showed himself.

The lull in the fight was of some little duration. The enemy had suffered considerable loss, and did not apparently relish the idea of repeating the thing, so they were looking out for opportunities in the line of getting a shot at Duncan, or advancing slowly without incurring a risk.

This latter was slow progress, for there were not as many places for concealment as they might have wished.

Several of them tried to draw his fire by thrusting out their sombreros from behind the trees that concealed them, but Duncan was too old a bird to be caught with chaff, and he was not deceived by this ancient trick in a single instance.

The situation was all the while growing more desperate, however, for the line of guerrillas advanced first a little at this point, then a little at that, continually contracting the circle as time went by.

It was like the gradual encircling of a serpent's folds, the continual pressure of the great constrictor when its prey was within its power. Although this advance of the guerrillas could hardly be noticed as it took place, yet at the end of half an hour the change of position was a radical one on their part. Another half-hour like the last and they would be so close that a rush would end all.

Still the Shark-Slayer was powerless to prevent it.

Now and then he managed to fire a shot, but it was always at the risk of his life, for there instantly flashed out a dozen weapons, and the leaden hail cut the air around the venturesome Sea-Diver.

Poor Little Texas suffered tortures seeing him thus exposed to such dangers without being allowed to share them, and when a stray bullet did enter the hollow pine and cut a scratch along her arm, she actually gloried in the sight of the delicate red stain it left behind, for it made her feel as if she had not been thrust into safety at the expense of her noble companion's life being jeopardized.

A panther could not have crept upon his intended prey with more caution than did the desperadoes of El Morte, and they would prove fully as remorseless as that savage animal when the quarry was in their possession.

They certainly had good cause to hate the Shark-Slayer.

Since the hour when he had defied El Morte in the gambling den of San Miguel, he had been a thorn in the flesh of these lawless men of blood who had so long ruled the coast.

Many of their number had fallen before his unerring aim, and possibly others might follow in the same route before he gave up the ghost. If the organization ruled over by the terrible El Morte was ever broken up, it would without a doubt be the work of this fearless man.

No wonder they hated him—no wonder they feared his power—no wonder that now they had him in their grasp to all appearances, they intended to crush him, cost what it might to consummate this thing.

The end was approaching. Inside of half an hour at the very utmost there must come a signal that would hurl these two-score of human tigers upon him. Duncan knew what the inevitable result must be. Death for him, and the same for Little Texas, for rather than again fall into the hands of El Morte, the brave girl had solemnly declared that she would shoot herself.

He might cause some devastation in the ranks of the enemy before giving up the ghost, but he his resistance ever so desperate, the one end awaited him.

It is not a pleasant thing to contemplate death, especially when no disease racks the body, and the bravest must ever feel a peculiar feeling when looking upon the approach of the grim monster, as though a clammy hand had suddenly been laid upon his throbbing heart, causing an icy chill to speed through his frame.

Duncan was brave as a lion, yet life was sweet to him. At one time he had believed there was nothing left to live for, until Little Texas had gradually crept into his heart, and his misanthropy vanished before the love for the brave little border girl that soon became a part of his being.

Still, when he could die with her, death lost much of its sting, and he suffered more in contemplating the fate of such a bright young life as that of the girl than because it seemed probable his own minutes were numbered.

When he had last surveyed the situation he had believed that in half an hour the guerrillas would be ready to push matters to the bitter end—that the rush must come which would be the signal of death.

Ten minutes of this last half hour had already slipped away and the advance of the guerrillas had been fully in proportion to what the Shark-Slayer had based his calculations upon.

Twenty minutes between life and eternity. Slowly the time was ebbing away; it was as though a man were fastened to a stake on the sea-shore with the tide coming in, gradually rising to his knees, then his hips, and creeping up inch by inch to overwhelm him in twenty minutes more.

He had ceased to listen for that hoped-for signal, and was trying to compose himself for death when from a point not a quarter of a mile away there came a sudden shrill whistle of prolonged and peculiar intonation.

The sound produced quite a shock upon Duncan. He could feel the warm blood spurting through his arteries while his heart beat like a trip-hammer.

"Saved, Little Texas, we are saved. That signal tells me my brave comrades have arrived. How they will scatter these mad devils as though they were the herd of swine into which the demons of evil were allowed to pass. Now to answer it and let them know we are in danger."

An instant later from the triangle of trees there arose a shrill whistle the exact counterpart of that which had come from the other part of the burned chaparral, only that immediately afterward Duncan gave utterance to a couple of short, sharp notes like the danger-signals of a locomotive.

The guerrillas jumped at the truth, and began backing out of their position, which was attended with no little risk, for the Shark-Slayer was as ready to assume the offensive as he had been the defensive, and more than one wretch had reason to curse the misfortune that led him to expose a portion of his precious anatomy to the deadly aim of the man they had been so lately hunting.

Ere they could get fully away the pearl-divers arrived upon the spot.

Then there was a heavy fusillade. The whole line of burnt timber seemed to be ablaze with the flashing of guns and the reports rolled up continuously, but the guerrillas were soon in full retreat.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE KING OF THE PEARL COAST.

THE Coast Vultures found that they were no match for the comrades of Duncan, so a hasty retreat was inaugurated; but there was little confusion manifested. They were too well trained for precipitate flight, and besides, they were fighting under the eye of their leader.

From tree to tree they dodged, firing whenever a chance arose, and the pearl-divers conducted the pursuit on the same principle, so

that the rattle of fire-arms made the echoes ring in the burnt forest.

Gradually the clangor of heavy firing seemed to move off, as the outlaws skillfully managed their retreat, and the spot where Duncan had so gallantly held forth was virtually deserted save by the two who still remained beside the triangle of pine trees.

Little Texas was binding up the wound of her companion.

Tenderly she performed the task, for the hurt had been received in her behalf, and was all the more precious because of this fact. The wound was not at all severe, but she bandaged it so tenderly, and the touch of her hands was so magnetic that looking into her clear eyes Duncan felt that a new life was opening up before him—a life whose breadth was greater than he had ever believed could be contained in the span of human existence, where love that would never prove false would make every day a paradise on earth.

From this dream of ecstatic bliss he was suddenly and rudely aroused.

Little Texas uttered an ejaculation of alarm, and at the same time, with both her hands upon Duncan's chest, pushed him backward as far as her strength would allow.

At the same instant there sounded the report of a weapon and the bullet that had been intended for the brain of the Shark-Slayer struck a tree close at hand, having passed between the two who stood there.

Turning with lightning-like quickness, at the same time snatching a revolver from his sash, Duncan saw a wounded guerrilla in the act of pulling back the hammer of his revolver for a second shot, while he cursed at the ill-luck attending his first.

The man was on one knee. His left arm hung useless at his side, which possibly accounted for the tardiness of his movements in once more preparing to fire.

Up went Duncan's weapon, and no matter how hasty the aim, with the report the guerrilla pitched over, hurling his weapon into the bushes that still smoked with smoldering fire.

The Sea-Diver strode forward.

Somehow the idea seemed to possess him that it was more than the ordinary hatred borne for him by the members of the guerrilla band that influenced the actions of this fellow—the venom was too deep not to have some unusual cause back of it.

The man was a stranger to him, a low-browed Mexican, who writhed with the agonies of approaching dissolution. He glared at the Shark-Slayer with hatred in his black eyes.

"*Careful!*" he hissed between his set white teeth, "you escaped me, my fine Diver, but so long as Don Pablo lives you will have a bitter foe on your trail. I guessed the secret. That revolver over yonder was placed in my hands by the one who gave me gold to kill you, and it had a name on it—the name of a woman. Don Pablo, who hates you like death, is—a—woman!"

It was with his last breath that the stricken Mexican gasped these words, and in another moment fell back dead.

They gave the Shark-Slayer a shock such as he might have received in handling an electric eel. As he saw the man's form stiffen in the last throes of death, and knew that it would be useless to endeavor to gain any further information from him, he turned and made for the spot where the weapon had fallen when sent whirling from the hand of the guerrilla.

Picking it up he seemed to experience a fearful sensation, for while a mighty shudder ran over his frame, his eyes remained glued upon the weapon.

It was a fancy toy, yet with a caliber heavy enough for material damage. Duncan turned it over as though he expected to find a name engraved upon a certain spot, and yet dreaded to look.

His worst fears were confirmed, for there, upon the butt, on a little silver plate, was the one word:

"MURIEL."

"My God!" muttered the man to himself, "and is she then still alive, when I hoped, and had every reason in the world to believe she was at peace? Wretched girl! how her insane belief has already wrecked the life that never harmed her. She has found me out even here. Those mad words which I treated as the ravings of one insane, may yet be made truth. The ends of the earth can not hide me from her. Poor Muriel, would that you were clothed in your right mind, and could listen to reason. But of what avail would argument be? Appearances were against me, and if an angel from Heaven came down to plead my cause I doubt whether she would be convinced. This false drama must be played to the end, and I suffer for the sins of as foul a villain as ever lived. There was that in the voice of Don Pablo in the cavern that sent a shudder through me. I comprehend it all now, but at the time could not make head or tail of it. Oh! here comes Little Texas. Heaven bless her. The hand that longs to strike me would fall upon her so that I might suffer through her, and yet Muriel protested

against such a sacrifice and endeavored to prevent the deed, which goes to prove that with the exception of this one mad freak she is still a woman. Texas must know nothing of this—it would chill her heart without doing any good."

Ah! Little Texas had heard the words of the dying guerrilla, and they had lodged deep in her brain. Already she had had certain suspicions in this line respecting the mysterious Don Pablo who sought the life of the Shark-Slayer, although she had said nothing of these vague thoughts to him.

Not a word did she speak now, but her eyes watched him with a mute uneasiness in their depths, as though she would have questioned how best she could serve him in the new dangers that would lie ahead.

After a time some of the pearl-divers came back from the hunt. They had two of the guerrillas in their power, one of whom was wounded.

These men seemed to guess what their doom must be, for they scowled and cursed, and showed signs of uneasiness when a lariat was produced.

They were black-faced ruffians and had doubtless seen much of crime in the past. Justice had at last overtaken them, and even their daring leader El Morte, at the bare mention of whose name every living soul along the coast had been wont to tremble, was powerless to save them.

When the pearl-divers left the spot and headed for San Miguel they left behind them two swaying forms, dangling from the blackened limb of a pine. The burnt forest bore strange fruit, and the great lazy vultures soaring far aloft, hovered over the spot, descending lower and lower as though they scented game, while beneath the hungry wolves clustered, snapping and snarling and leaping high in the air as they eyed the swinging bodies of the guerrillas with longing eyes.

Border justice has at least one merit. When the culprit is caught in the act no time is wasted, no judge or jury required, but a rope and a tree are all that is needed for the work of retribution. Sometimes an innocent man suffers, but this is seldom the case, and how many men have been hung in the civilized States upon circumstantial evidence alone who were afterward proven innocent of the crime?

During the march to San Miguel, Duncan narrated to his friends the stirring adventures which he had seen since reaching the cliff-bordered arm of the sea on the previous evening, after parting from Buckskin, the old hunter whom he had met by appointment and sent back to hasten the movements of the pearl-divers, on the road as he well knew.

On their part they had entered the cliff caverns by means of the dangling lariat which had been left by Duncan, as the reader will remember.

This was hours later, and at the time when the Shark-Slayer and Little Texas, having escaped from the sepulcher of the Montezumas, were at bay in the forest and chaparral, behind the rude stockade of logs.

The pearl-divers had done all the damage possible in the caverns so that it was hardly probable El Morte and his men would think of making use of them again, as they had other retreats in the mountains that were unknown to the enemy.

When the men of San Miguel once more issued forth it was to see the forest ablaze, and learn that it had been fired almost an hour before. The rain was beginning to fall, and soon the deluge that descended drenched them to the skin, but this was not an unusual thing with men of their caliber, much of whose life was spent beneath the surface of the water.

Later on, at dawn, while they were heading for the coast town, despairing of learning aught of the fate of their gallant leader, the report of fire-arms drew them to the burnt chaparral which they had thus far studiously avoided, and the result has already been made manifest.

The brave fellows were delighted at the signal success that had come upon their arms, and proud of the exploits of their dashing leader, whom many of them regarded with such respect that they would have lain down their lives for him if need be.

Duncan was unusually silent and thoughtful during the march to San Miguel, and while Little Texas walked at his side she did not intrude upon his thoughts.

Once or twice she intercepted a glance which he cast at her, and while she answered it with a smile, her heart was chilled, for unless she was mistaken, there was much of pain in the look he bent upon her.

The revelation contained in the words of the dying guerrilla, and the name upon the revolver seemed to have cast a gloomy pall over his feelings, and even the presence of Little Texas, usually exercising such power over him, had no apparent effect just then to arouse him from the train of thought brought about by these circumstances.

San Miguel was reached at last, and the inhabitants, ever fickle, forgetful of the fact that two days before they had been ready to shout for El Morte, no sooner learned of what terrible

punishment had been visited upon the desperadoes than they yelled themselves hoarse applauding the name of the Shark-Killer.

Duncan paid little heed to them, however. He sought not glory, but had determined that so long as his followers stuck by him he would wage a bitter war against the men of blood and plunder, whose reign upon the coast had already been too long and fraught with too much crime.

San Miguel soon quieted down and resumed the ordinary vocations that marked the daily life in the little Mexican town.

Gambling in the night was the usual diversion for those who spent the day in labor or idleness. In Mexico, every one gambles more or less—it is an inherent part of one's education to stake money on the turn of a die, or the flip of a card, and both high and low can be seen betting at the same table, elbowing each other in the ribs, and meeting on a level.

The people seemed to fall into a gross error respecting the discomfiture of El Morte.

Since the outlaw chieftain had been defeated on the two separate occasions in which he had measured strength with the pearl-divers, they believed he was no longer to be feared, and here was where they made a great mistake.

El Morte had been enraged by his defeats, but he still had a powerful backing and was determined to make his enemies suffer for the short triumph they enjoyed. The blow was to fall sooner than even the most suspicious would imagine.

CHAPTER XX.

PERILS OF PEARL DIVING.

On the following day, business was resumed at San Miguel. For two days it had been so sadly interfered with, that every one was glad enough to return once more to work, and when the pearl-fisheries set the wheel in motion, the whole machinery of the Mexican town began to move, for it all depended upon the class of men who fished up the pearl oysters.

This work has changed but little in its routine since the Government first took an interest in it, only that at the present day it has degenerated to some extent, the number and value of the pearls not being as great as formerly.

Most of the boats that go out are owned by a few men termed the masters, who hire the divers for a certain per cent. of the catch. The pearl oysters are not found in such dense beds as the luscious bivalves we eat with such relish, but are more detached, so that the work of gathering them is much more severe.

Besides, they cannot be scooped up or raised with a pair of oyster-tongs, but divers have to be employed who go down with a bag or a basket, and by the use of a knife, detach the oyster from the rocks to which they cling, coming up as soon as his breath is exhausted, after which his catch is hauled into the boat, and the feat is repeated.

At evening, all the boats draw near a landing, beside which is the building of the custom officers, placed here by the Government to see that the state gets its share.

The oysters are now divided into three heaps, one of which goes to the state, a second to the master, while the third is handed over to the men of the boat, who take their share away for a hurried examination, sometimes to find a treasure, but often next to nothing.

The pearls find a ready sale with the many brokers in the little town, who make sure of large profits, while the divers spend their money in gambling and the necessities of life.

Generally, with those who can wait, the oysters are allowed to rot before they are examined, and hence a village or town on the pearl coast is generally far from being the sweetest place under the sun.

The Government, while placing such a heavy tax upon the pearl-fisheries, is supposed to protect them, but this they had certainly failed to do for some years past, as El Morte, the robber, had done almost as he pleased.

It can be readily surmised that a life such as was led by these pearl-divers was one conducive to peril. Not only did they have to meet all perils, such as must accompany a life in the water, at a depth where such a thing as the cramp must mean certain death, but there were other dangers as well which became a part of their routine.

Sharks frequented the pearl coast.

These savage monsters had been the death of more than one pearl-diver, and were a source of constant uneasiness to the men, who avoided them whenever it was possible.

The man who went down into the depths of the sea to hunt pearl-oysters carried with him either a knife or a stick of iron-wood, about a foot in length and sharpened at both ends, but under all circumstances the latter, as it could be used to detach the oyster and at the same time would serve as a weapon against a shark should the diver be brought to close quarters with the ravenous fish.

If a diver, busy at his work, chances to look up and see a shark hovering above him, he no longer sets about detaching oysters but devotes his whole time to eluding the man-eater.

This is often a hard task.

He moves some little distance along the bottom of the sea, and, looking up, discovers to his alarm and consternation that the man-eater has followed his movements and is there above him, lazily flapping his tail and fins, and waiting for him to come up.

Again the pearl-diver tries to dodge away, but like a merciless shadow the shark hovers above him.

Only one thing now remains to be done; if that proves a failure, then he must meet the shark and see which shall come off victor.

Hastening to a bed of sand he stirs it violently with the sharp-pointed stick, until the water above is filled with the fine particles, and the voracious fish is unable to see him.

Under cover of this he swims away, and, rising to the surface, is taken into the boat more dead than alive.

Generally the shark remains standing sentry over the spot where the sand has been stirred up, but once in a while the man will meet his foe as he rises toward the surface. Then his mode of procedure is to thrust the stout double-pointed stick into the capacious mouth of the shark, already opened to receive him, and in such a position that the jaws, armed with such fearful teeth, are held apart.

Sometimes the encounter does not end so happily for the pearl-diver. There are many men in the towns along the pearl coast who have lost a leg or an arm from the snap of a shark's jaws, and more than one man has vanished entirely, his fate a mystery, yet easily guessed, as he must have been carried off by some monster of the deep, a shark or octopus, the latter being the dreaded, many-armed devil-fish of the tropics.

Among the divers of San Miguel, there was one man who had never been known to refuse a fight with a shark—indeed, on more than one occasion he had actually leaped overboard when a comrade was in danger and getting between the imperiled man and his foe draw the attention of the shark to himself, and end the matter by slaying the great fish.

This man was Duncan.

Armed only with a knife he feared no shark, however great the proportions of the fish. One slash at the white belly was all Duncan wanted, and he would accomplish this feat with a dexterity no native Indian along the coast dared to emulate.

His boldness won for him the admiration of all men, and even the guerrillas of the coast would rather have made an enemy of any man than the Shark-Slayer.

That he was not valiant in this particular alone was made evident during his recent encounter with the guerrillas when he defied and successfully held at bay the whole confederation of scoundrels for a length of time.

Duncan was as agile as a fish in the water, and could outswim any one in San Miguel, while he had been known to remain under the water almost twice as long as his comrades. There are some such men who seem to be possessed of more than ordinary abilities in this line.

Much of mystery hung about the Shark-Slayer.

He had come into the neighborhood some years before and had never lacked for gold, yet instead of becoming a master and having boats of his own, he had hired out to a man who lived in the stone house on the hill overlooking the ocean, and had faithfully done his duty ever since.

There was that about the adventurous life that charmed him, and he seemed to enjoy the society of the bold men who constituted the corps of divers. Possibly he foresaw that the time must come when the yoke of El Morte must be thrown off by the people along the coast, and it was his wish to be a leader in the movement against the power of the guerrilla chieftain.

Little Texas had gradually crept into his life until he loved her, and the girl on her part worshipped Duncan with all the strength of her innocent heart.

The relationship between them at the time they were introduced to the reader was of this manner, and the perils through which they had passed in company were such as would naturally draw them closer together.

As the girl was without a protector the Shark-Slayer had assumed her guardianship, and it was generally understood that the man who harmed or insulted her would have to bear the brunt of his anger.

Besides, Little Texas was known to be a sure shot with the rifle she carried, and on this account additional respect was paid her. She was accustomed to roaming the country at will, but after her late series of adventures it would not be safe to continue this any longer, for the guerrillas were probably only waiting for an opportunity to do harm.

When the pearl-divers went to their day's labor now, they left men on guard at the little village, who would give the desperadoes a warm reception should they appear. A code of signals was also arranged whereby those out upon the water could be warned of the first appearance

of danger to those who were on the land, and thus he enabled to hasten to shore.

It was pretty generally believed, however, that El Morte had received such a lesson that would make him extremely careful how he meddled with the pearl-divers in the future, and also that he would change his base and proceed to a quarter of the coast more remote from San Miguel, and where his name would still be a power.

They did not know El Morte.

The repulses he had received only served to make him more furious, and he had sworn a mighty oath that he who was the cause of his reverse of fortune, should not live to enjoy the fruits of that triumph.

Upon Duncan's head he swore a terrible vengeance, and once the Shark-Slayer was out of the way it would not be hard for him to regain his old position.

If the Shark-Slayer suspected such a thing he did not betray his thoughts even to Little Texas. His mind was filled with the strange things that had occurred to him, and chief of all the presence in this remote district of the woman he had believed dead—the mysterious and vengeful Muriel.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE INTERRUPTED FANDANGO.

SAN MIGUEL, wishing to celebrate her freedom from the yoke of the oppressor, decided to give a fandango.

This is nothing more nor less than a dance at which the national airs are played and dances strictly Mexican on the programme. Among the Mexican people dancing is much in vogue, which accounts for their graceful carriage. A fandango is held only at rare intervals, and is a public ball, seldom a private enterprise.

As may be expected, rough characters are always found at these places of entertainment, yet being in the minority they usually keep the peace.

What quarrels ensue, often leading to bloodshed, are more generally the result of jealousy, this trait being peculiarly prominent in Mexican character.

Duncan was the lion of the hour. However much he might dislike this notoriety he could not well avoid it, since the honors were thrust upon him.

On the night of the fandango all San Miguel was given up to feasting and music. Only a Mexican town could enter into such an arrangement with whole-souled spirit.

As the affair was to be so general it was thought best by those having it in charge to hold the fandango in the great plaza or public square, which would accommodate all who desired to take part in the festivities.

Early in the evening a dozen bonfires were started, and a stranger entering the town at this hour could not have failed to notice that some event of an unusual character was about to take place.

Hoarse voices arose in shouts and cheers, and men, women and children flocked to the grand plaza from all the quarters of the town.

It was a gay sight the blazing bonfires and innumerable torches disclosed. The señoritas were garbed in their best, and their male escorts were resplendent with the showy attire that makes the national costume of Mexico so picturesque.

All seemed to be in the gayest of spirits, and laughed and chatted as they drew near the plaza where the dancing was already in progress.

A large square floor of boards had been erected. It was only a foot or so from the ground, and upon this the dancing was being carried out.

At one end of the platform the musicians were stationed.

They were four in number. One had a base viol, a second a trombone, a third a heavy drum, which, when pounded upon, drowned all other noise by the magic of its heavy boom, boom, boom; while the fourth of the quartette had a mandolin, the national musical instrument of Mexico.

The mandolin is an instrument resembling the guitar in many respects, and gives forth charming music when in the proper hands—the white fingers of a black-eyed señorita of Castilian birth—but in the present instance it was only once in a great while that the mandolin was allowed an opportunity to make itself heard, and then the savage twanging at its strings by the musician, who had already indulged in a little too much mescal, rendered the music hideous.

When the band got under full headway, the clamor that arose from the grand plaza and its immediate neighborhood was fearful in the extreme, and would have frightened any respectable dog within an inch of his life, but the curs of San Miguel were too accustomed to such rackets to pay more than ordinary attention; indeed, there is every reason to believe that many of them took advantage of the occasion to lend their sweet voices to swell the racket.

An American entering this little Mexican town just at this time must have thought that bedlam had been let loose, yet to those to the manner born, everything was exactly as it should be.

Duncan was of course the hero of the hour.

He had to dance with the belle of San Miguel, and when he had thus started the ball going he refused to longer remain upon the stage in the form of a participant, but standing by the side of Little Texas, he watched the gay scene as a spectator.

Little Texas had blossomed forth on this occasion, and looked bewitching with the flowers decking her hair and the gay ribbons on her dress.

Duncan was proud of her, and yet an anxious expression flitted over his face now and then when gazing upon her unknown to the girl, who was absorbed in watching the peculiar motion of the dance, something like a schottische, as though fears of impending evil were worrying him.

The time wore on.

When the fandango had been in progress some two hours with only one fight to mark its progress, the two victims of which had been carried off in a half-dazed condition, with pistol and machete wounds upon

their persons, it might be supposed that the entertainment would slacken, but this was not so.

As soon as any of the dancers would drop out of line, their places were immediately filled by others who had impatiently awaited their turn, the small space at the command of the dancers having thus far restricted the number engaged.

The quartette of musicians looked as though they were in for an all night's performance, and sawed or pounded or twanged away like so many automatic figures, making the night hideous and the very atmosphere tremble with their wild melody.

It had been the belief of the Shark-Slayer that they were about to have trouble with El Morte and his men before this night was over. He had received no positive information to this effect, but some intuition seemed to tell him so, for had he been in the place of the guerrilla chieftain, he would have been apt to choose this night of festivity upon which to descend upon the town.

It was deemed a wise precaution, therefore, to leave a strong guard at the little village on the slope of the hill, while every one of the pearl-divers who attended the fandango went armed. They carried revolvers, and a dozen rifles were secreted under one end of the platform where they could be readily seized upon in the event of their being needed.

The hour grew on apace.

Wild and more furious became the revel, and louder beat the base drum, while the viol, the trombone and the outraged mandolin ran a race to see which should bring up the rear.

Duncan was thinking of withdrawing from the scene, which had lost all of its charms for him. He would have done so some time before only for the reason that the weird entertainment had been given in his honor, and the people who participated in the fandango imagined that they were doing the thing up in a manner that left nothing wanting. He knew their touchy, thin-skinned natures from long contact with them, and did not wish to offend those who professed to be his friends when his star was in the ascendant, but many of whom would turn upon him in the event of a change, to shout for El Morte with all the fervid power with which they now led the cheers for the Shark-Slayer.

He did not expect anything better, knowing the fickle nature of a Mexican populace too well. The only ones upon whom he depended were the pearl-divers, and as long as these brave fellows remained true to him he had no reason to fear El Morte and his men.

Little Texas had left his side for a time in order to speak with some old friends of her foster-father, the hunter who had brought her to this region, and whom she had detected in the crowd. Duncan had lost sight of her entirely for a few minutes, and he was even becoming a little uneasy about her when his attention was attracted to another quarter.

A man had arrived upon the outskirts of the throng and was forcing his way through, making use of his elbows and arms as though he were wild.

Many gave him room, and not a few men finding themselves thus jostled so rudely cast dark looks upon the fellow while they laid their hands menacingly upon the machetes in their serapes but no sooner did they recognize the man and see the condition which he was in than their rage vanished as suddenly as it appeared, and they even aided him to force a passage.

Such was the tumult that not a sound could be heard from any particular quarter that was not blended with the tremendous roar of the musicians.

Duncan could simply see that a man was wildly making his way toward the stage, and he realized that something had occurred or was about to occur that was not down on the programme for the night's entertainment.

He watched the fellow's course with great interest, saw him surmount this crowd and plunge into the next like a vessel upon the sea, meeting the billows and overcoming them. All the while he was drawing nearer. That he was shouting out some words was evident from the manner in which his mouth opened, and the looks of those in his immediate vicinity, but not a sound reached the ears of those on the platform.

Gayly the dancers moved about, while the musicians made their instruments fairly groan with the awful noises they evoked.

By degrees the man neared the platform. Duncan watched him with unusual interest. To all appearances he had seen rough usage for his hair was wild looking and what appeared to be blood-marks seamed his face, making it quite unrecognizable even if the other circumstances had not already done so.

Duncan might have thought this was one of the two men who had been concerned in the recent fracas, returning in wrath to vent his fury upon some of those who had favored the cause of his antagonist, but for the excitement that followed in his wake.

Men waved their arms wildly, and even weapons were brandished in the air by a few.

Still the imperturbable musicians hammered and sawed away, and so long as they continued their clamor the dancers had eyes and ears for nothing beyond the movement and its accompanying exhilaration.

At last by a powerful effort the man reached the platform at that point where on a raised dais the musicians sat.

As he clambered up and stood in full view, an exclamation fell from Duncan's lips. Although the man was bedraggled and dirty with evidences of more than one wound about him, the keen eyes of the Shark-Slayer recognized in him Captain Gomez, the officer in charge of the Government quarters, and the man who saw that the customs were levied upon the pearl-fisheries.

Usually he was something of a dandy, though it was said that he had seen hard service when Maximilian brought war into Mexico, and because of these rumors he had been respected by the people of San Miguel. Just now he had no pretensions for such honor, as he was in a shameful plight.

Captain Gomez was evidently in a hot rage. The difficulty he had experienced in making his way through the crowd had evidently stirred up his choler, for his face was now red as the wattles of a strutting turkey-cock.

As he gained an upright position he raised his arm above his head, and from the movement of his

mouth it was evident that he was shouting the word.

"Silencio!"

Not a particle of attention was paid to him; indeed, Duncan was in all probability the only one who saw the captain, and he might not have known of his presence but for the fact of his having watched his course through the crowd.

Again and again the soldier strove to make himself heard, but it was utterly out of the question.

A few near him turned their heads with a scowl, and although the dark frown vanished when they learned who it was from whom this shout proceeded which appeared to annoy them yet they were not able to assist him in any way.

It was evident that harsher methods must be practiced.

By this time the captain had ceased to shout that one word, "silencio," and from the movement of his lips it was evident that he was hurling curses at the quartette of musicians who wrought such discordant jumbling sounds so that their ears were deadened to the outside world.

He was only a few yards from them, and when Duncan saw the enraged soldier making toward the four, he realized that there was going to be trouble in the camp.

Still the automata puffed and banged and rasped and clawed away at their tortured instruments, no doubt believing that the very air was charmed by the ravishing sounds they produced.

The captain dropped his head near that of the man who held the bass viol, and for a last time shouted:

"Silencio!"

Possibly the musician thought a fly had buzzed close to his ear, for he shook his head as though to disturb its alighting. The last trump of Gabriel would hardly have affected his equanimity.

This was a straw too much—it broke the camel's back.

The captain gave way to ungovernable rage, and snatching the cracked bass viol from the hands of its astonished owner, he raised it on high and in quick succession brought it down upon the heads of the other three musicians.

When he of the trombone was struck he dropped his instrument and flattened himself out upon the dais, no doubt believing a meteor had descended upon him.

Again the bass viol was raised, and mandolin and player went over the back of the platform in a heap.

Still the drummer kept up his horrid thumping until he, too, had received a terrific whack over the head. In falling from the platform he managed, in some way, to thrust his head through the sheepskin stretched over the drum, and arising thus, caused roars of laughter from the dancers, who, now that the music had ceased, were compelled to come to a halt.

"Silencio!"

This time the voice of the soldier rung out above the tumult, and was so impressive that immediate quiet came upon the throng, with all eyes turned upon the captain.

"Citizens of San Miguel, the hour has come when we can no longer countenance the deeds of the guerrillas of the coast. From this hour the Government is their enemy. El Morte has been here. On this very night he and his band attacked the custom-house, murdered two of my men, wounded myself, and robbed the treasury. Arouse, men of San Miguel, arouse. To arms! To arms!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ROBBERY OF THE TREASURE-HOUSE.

"To arms! To arms!"

The shout was caught up and echoed far and near by the men of San Miguel, whose blood was now wrought up to fever-heat, for when El Morte and his guerrilla band grew bold or desperate enough to assail the Government building, whose home could be safe from the impending danger?

High above the shouts came a shrill whistle.

It was the signal of the Shark-Slayer, the same which rung through the burnt chaparral when the guerrilla fiends were pressing hard upon Duncan and Little Texas, bringing new hope to their despairing hearts.

No sooner had it sounded than men were seen making their way to the point where stood Duncan.

They were dashing-looking fellows, some of them natives of the country, a few Englishmen and foreigners from Europe while at least half were Americans.

These were the pearl-divers.

A commotion was now visible in the crowd and the sharp thud and ring of horses' hoofs upon the stones forming the flagging of the grand plaza announced the arrival of no inconsiderable body of men on horseback.

Who they were was not at once made apparent though the light from the torches and bonfires showed the sombreros and serapes consequent upon Mexican attire. The clanking of their great spurs as they struck the scabbards of swords or rattled against each other was even plainly heard, such was the silence that had come upon the grand plaza.

Then came shots and loud oaths.

"El Mortel! El Mortel!" rung out from scores of throats.

There were without a doubt numbers of sympathizers of the guerrilla in the throng, ready to be swayed from side to side as the popular current seemed to demand.

It was evidently the intention of the guerrilla chieftain in making his bold dash into the town at such a supreme moment to capture this floating popular opinion and turn the tide in his favor.

He knew that since the disgraceful defeat of his men in the gambling-den, and the battle in the burnt forest he must have lost caste with the population of San Miguel, and it was to take this feeling of admiration for boldness, by storm that had been one reason of his opening hostilities with the Government by robbing the custom-house.

It was no doubt the same spirit of bravado that now led him to seek the grand plaza, where the citizens of San Miguel were enjoying themselves so hugely, in order to strike terror to the hearts of

those who had proven recalcitrant, and gone over to the enemy in the guerrillas' hour of discomfiture.

The appearance of the famous guerrilla leader, in their midst after what had occurred, excited the fickle populace very much.

They even forgot that at that very moment they were engaged in celebrating his downfall. The old feeling was strong upon them, and when, from a secret ally of the robber chief the cry, "El Morte forever!" arose, it was received with shouts.

Pistol-shots were heard, accompanied with hoarse yells.

"Down with the Shark-Slayer! Death to Duncan!"

The words rolled from a score of throats, and backed by the clamor that arose all around seemed to be full of terrible significance, but Duncan feared not. He comprehended just what the tactics of El Morte were and he was ready to meet them.

When that whistle had rung out the pearl-divers began to congregate around their leader. From below several of them who had been guarding the dozen rifles secreted under the platform quickly armed the comrades who were near, and when this had been fully accomplished, there suddenly appeared beside Duncan and his little group, more than half a score of men who held glittering guns in their hands.

The sight of these appeared to alarm the bandits not a little.

Already their horses were trampling out the bonfires, and wherever a mounted man could reach a torch he plucked it down and hurled it away over the heads of the surging crowd. Sometimes a torch thus thrown was caught by a hand raised in the crowd, and presently the few thus grasped were the only lights that fell upon the scene.

In this semi-darkness the figures of the riders as they urged their steeds hither and thither were only dimly seen, and the pearl-divers dared not fire upon them for fear of striking inoffensive persons.

Though the cunning of the guerrilla chief had thus brought the advantage to his side, yet El Morte realized that his scheme was only partially successful, for the pearl-divers were evidently too well armed for a meeting, so at a signal the Vultures began to vanish with the same rapidity as they had appeared.

The clanking and clattering ceased, but their shouts and the shots they fired into the air could long be heard as they made through the other end of the town, and from thence over the open space lying between San Miguel and the little village on the western slope of the ridge overlooking the sea.

Then the fires were started again and an investigation made, during which it was discovered that no material damage had resulted from the appearance of the guerrillas upon the grand plaza. A few bruises had been received from the hoofs of their prancing steeds or the torches which they threw about so indiscriminately, but beyond this there was no harm wrought.

It was while they were finding this out and endeavoring to extricate the band of musicians from their predicament, that a man broke wildly through the crowd and sought Duncan.

He was a pearl-diver, and he brought alarming news.

Chancing to be on the outskirts of the town at the moment when the guerrillas dashed out of it, he had secreted himself by the roadside to let them pass by, guessing their identity. As they passed, he had heard El Morte call out loudly:

"To San Mateo!"
This was the name of the little village where the pearl-divers had their homes. The consciousness that El Morte had led his villainous gang thither, struck a chill to their hearts. Did he intend to renew the terrible deed of the night when the ears of the helpless women were mutilated, or worse than that?

Duncan rallied his men around him, and off they set at a run, heading for the slope of the ridge.

They had high hopes that the comrades whom they had left to guard their homes might be able to beat off the enemy, and still their fears were aroused when they remembered the horrors of that night.

Half-way to the village they heard the heavy reports of firearms mingled with yells.

This spurred them on to renewed exertions, and finally the village was gained. All was silent around them. The ruins of the houses burned on the former visit of the guerrillas still smoked, and the curling vapor could be seen rising in the starlight.

What could it mean?

Had the guerrillas succeeded in their hellish designs, and was this silence indicative of death and rapine?

A hail broke in upon their fears—it was quickly answered, and then they found, to their delight, that the guards had nobly done their duty. The guerrillas had attacked the village but had been easily driven off, as they had not expected to find it guarded by determined men and were not ready to enter into an open engagement, knowing that help would soon be coming to the men of San Mateo from the adjacent town.

The robbers from the mountains had succeeded well in one thing—the capture of the custom-house. As this place had been deemed the one building secure from the rapacity of the daring El Morte, who did not hesitate to break into private houses or banks when the mood was upon him, of late years the brokers in the town had grown into the habit of depositing much of their valuables there, the money sent them wherewith to purchase pearls, until it was needed, and the valuables thus bought, until a chance afforded to send them under convoy to a point whence they could be shipped to the Mexican capital.

El Morte had long known this fact, and on more than one occasion had been strongly tempted to make a descent upon the place under some disguise and gut it.

He had only been restrained from so doing by the compact he had made with the Government officials to the effect that so long as he did not meddle with their affairs, they would wink at his work along the coast if kept within reasonable bounds.

Up to this time the agreement had been kept on both sides, though, as has been said before, the guerrillas were growing continually bolder.

When events that had not been expected on the part of El Morte brought about the rupture in the casino, and the fact became very evident that it was

to be war to the knife between the guerrillas and all who opposed them along the coast, the soldiers included, the daring chieftain determined to anticipate the action of the coast guard by a swoop upon the treasure trove secreted in the custom-house on the outskirts of San Miguel.

He had chosen his hour well.

While the din of the fandango was drowning all other sounds, he and his band rode up to the building, where the captain and three men were alone, the rest of the coast guard having been granted permission to attend the dance, where their gay uniforms would lend variety to the scene.

The attack had been sudden.

Refusing to surrender, the captain had held out until the door was broken in, when a *melee* had ensued which resulted in the death of two of the soldiers and the general demoralization of the valiant captain. He had managed to escape, however, and gaining the open air by means of a window in the rear of the house, which he crashed through without opening, had made at full speed for the grand plaza to give the alarm, whither El Morte and his daring men followed him as soon as they had rifled the custom-house of its treasure.

By this overt act El Morte had arrayed the soldiers of the Government against him, in addition to the pearl-divers.

The news of the daring robbery would soon reach the Mexican capital, and must result in another expedition being sent out against him which, being aided by such men as the pearl-divers must give him even more trouble than the former one had done.

He seemed reckless of consequences.

Besides, much time must elapse before the Government expedition could reach San Miguel, and during the interim he intended to be busy.

It was patent that if he could put the Shark-Slayer out of the way the league of the pearl-divers would fall to pieces, being without a head, and it would now be his work to accomplish this dastardly act.

Strange indeed it would be if in all San Miguel there could not be found a place where an assassin might hide, and from whence he could send the deadly knife or bullet that would effectually remove Duncan from their path.

That the Shark-Slayer and his men might not choose to wait for the arrival of the Government expedition had not entered the head of the brigand, and yet he should have known Duncan well enough for this. The latter had his scouts out and was rapidly picking up such information as would best enable him to hurl his forces upon the stronghold of the outlaws, whom he meant to crush at one decisive blow.

The populace of the coast town was strangely divided.

Part of them were for the pearl-divers, while the worst element of the place, including the gamblers, were secretly exulting in the bold, hawk-like swoop the brigand had made upon the treasure-house of the Government.

So long as the treasure remained within those walls the chances of their ever possessing it were slim indeed, but once in the hands of El Morte's men it would not be long before every onza of it would flow into their greedy coffers.

Thus a strange restlessness, like a feverish nightmare came upon the coast. The divers shirked their work to a great extent, and it seemed to be a settled matter that affairs should thus remain *in statu quo* until the trouble was ended in one way or another.

Either El Morte must win the day and rule as before, king of the pearl-coast, or else he and his desperado Vultures be crushed out of existence.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LANSOED.

The night was a dark one.

Not for half an hour or more would the moon arise, and in the mean time the streets of San Miguel were gloomy and full of danger for the traveler. As usual, at such times when any one of importance found it necessary to pass to or from the gambling dens of the grand plaza through these dark and ill-kept streets, he was preceded and followed by torch-bearers, while perhaps an armed retainer strode on each side.

Even such a retinue had not been deemed absolute safety during the reign of El Morte, for should they be suddenly confronted by half a dozen robbers, the torch-bearers were very apt to stand like statues while the guards threw down their arms and fled like deer.

Since the discomfiture of the guerrillas, robberies had been less frequent, and the citizens were just beginning to appreciate the luxury of such freedom.

Duncan had been warned more than once to be careful, for his men saw what the policy of the guerrilla chieftain would probably be, but he did not pay much attention to these fears on the part of his followers.

This carelessness on his part came near costing him dear. He believed that so long as his hand was on the butt of his revolver, no man could get the better of him, but in this view of the matter he was mistaken, as he soon learned.

On the night in question, he had been to the casino to meet a couple of his scouts who were to be there.

They had brought in very encouraging reports from the mountains, and it became evident to the Shark-Slayer after hearing what they had to say, that the time for moving upon the stronghold of the Coast Vultures was near at hand.

There were some among those in the casino who eyed the trio with lowering brows, no doubt understanding that the scouts had brought important news to their leader, but these men did not dare to make a hostile move, and finding themselves the objects of scrutiny on the part of many present, they wreathed their faces in smiles again, and paid close attention to the games they were playing.

A little later one of them went out, and after a time he was followed by a second and a third.

Nobody noticed their absence, for men were going and coming at all hours.

At last, Duncan prepared to depart. It had been his habit to have company, and on this night one of his friends started with him, but at the door was called back by being offered an unusually fine chance in a game. At the time, it seemed more accident, but viewed in the light cast upon it by sub-

sequent events, it was seen that there was method in the madness that prompted this reckless offer.

Duncan, thus left alone, cast his eyes around the room, and seeing his friends all busily engaged, without a word stepped out into the night.

As he left the lighted plaza behind him and entered upon one of the side streets, the moon peeped above the hills in the east, and the darkness was suddenly although not wholly dispelled. The shadows were still dense, for the rim of the silver disk, just a little beyond its stage of perfection, was just in sight and Luna's full glory had not appeared in view.

The Shark-Slayer was not to be caught napping.

He had his hand upon a revolver, and no man could draw in an emergency with more lightning rapidity than he. Should the occasion arise, he would give the enemy a warm reception.

Down the street he went until near the outskirts of the town. By this time the moon had sailed half into view, and the shadows were in full retreat.

As yet no danger had threatened him; but the end was not yet.

Suddenly he became aware that a human form had stepped out from the shadow of a house ahead of him, and stood in his way.

Under the circumstances this was what might be called a suspicious act, and Duncan's revolver at once flashed into view.

The action must have been seen by the man ahead, for he at once raised his arms above his head, at the same time crying out:

"Hold on, Senor Duncan! Do not fire. I am a friend, and have news for you."

"Stand where you are then, and tell me your name," called the Shark-Slayer, still suspicious of the unknown.

"You are in danger, senor. This is no time for delay. If you would escape you must be quick. Even now it may be too late to save Little Texas."

The attention of the Shark-Slayer was at once riveted when that name was mentioned. Danger to himself he could laugh at, but when Little Texas was in peril he became uneasy. This was just what the man desired, and once the attention of Duncan was fully gained it was all that was needed.

There was a whirring sound, coming from whence no one could have said without a knowledge of the facts; then a ring of tough rope flew through the air and settled over the shoulders of the Shark-Slayer.

At the same instant the lasso was drawn taut with a strong jerk that almost pulled Duncan from his feet, and caused the revolver to fall from his hand.

Ere he could recover from the shock produced by this abrupt assault three men came plunging at him from as many different directions, the Mexican who had assaulted him being one of the trio.

They hurled their united weight upon him and bore him to the ground, where one of them clutched his throat in a cruel grip while the others hastily wound the lariat around him so that he could move neither hand or foot.

Duncan, the Shark-Slayer was a prisoner.

He was in the power of the foes who hated him, like poison, and the chances seemed against his ever leaving them alive. Why they did not murder him then and there he did not at first fully understand, it was so opposed to the usual policy of the Vultures, for whom mercy was a strained quality, but after a little he came to the conclusion that the secret he held regarding the great quantity of gold found in the sepulcher of the Montezumas still weighed upon the mind of the guerrilla chief who wished to wring it from him by torture ere he put him to death.

In this he was mistaken.

Bitter hatred for the Shark-Slayer, engendered long ago and fanned afresh by the recent troubles between them had wiped out all desire for that secret in the mind of the bandit king, and were he alone concerned in the matter Duncan would have been stabbed on the spot.

When the pearl-diver felt himself raised and borne away he was puzzled to know where they were about to take him, though he expected to stand face to face with El Morte ere long.

To his surprise they bore him to a cabin that was isolated from its fellows, and stood there dark and gloomy.

A knock upon the door was answered from within, and the door was opened. After the three men had entered with their burden the door was again closed.

Darkness surrounded them.

"Have you got him?" asked an eager voice.

"Caramba! yes, and the money is ours," replied one of the men.

"Not yet," replied the voice, "the work is only half done. Lay him on the floor."

The men did so. Then someone bent over the prostrate man, hot breath fanned his cheek and he could imagine he saw the gleaming orbs like those of a tiger which tried to pierce the darkness and gather the outlines of his face.

Something touched his throat—he could hardly repress a shudder, for the sharp prick he received came, as he well knew, from the keen point of a dagger.

"Do you feel my dagger at your throat, Duncan McGregor?" hissed a sibilant voice, full of rage, in his ear.

"I do," he replied, calmly.

"And does it not make you tremble? Do you know whose dagger is thus close to your life?"

"I know you, Muriel. The man you hired to kill me told me the secret of Don Pablo, and the finding of your revolver with that name upon it was enough. I even suspected you in the cavern when you so bravely stood up against El Morte in the defense of Little Texas. For that noble act I have forgiven you much of the past."

"You forgive! Ha! ha! that is rich. Here am I hunting a man half-around the world in order to take a terrible revenge upon him, and when he is in my power he talks about forgiving me. The wrongs you put upon me in the past cry out like open wounds that will not cease to bleed until your life has wiped out the stain. Curse you! Duncan McGregor, you are at my mercy, and you do not leave this cabin alive."

The disguised woman was evidently a tigress who, believing herself wronged, would not listen to

reason, but in her blind rage carry out her diabolical plan of revenge.

Duncan had reason to know her well in the past, and he realized how worse than useless it would be to attempt to deceive her. Besides, he was suffering from a sense of indignation and outraged feelings that made him almost dumb.

Did she but know it, this woman who had once been his wife, who had hunted him down at last, intent on vengeance, owed him a debt she could never pay, and yet she believed he had foully wronged her in the past, and no words of his could convince her otherwise.

Still he made one effort, more to save her from committing the crime of murder than because he wished to save his own life.

"Muriel," he said, quietly, "would you listen if I sought to tell you something—to inform you of the truth and how it could be proven? There is one not far away who should feel the weight of your anger, not me. Will you hear this, or shall the tragedy go on?"

She laughed then in a cold-blooded way that would make a shudder run through a man. Before she spoke a word the Shark-Slayer knew his doom was sealed.

"Never, Duncan McGregor! Think you I have wasted these years to be cheated now when the power is mine? Ha! you little understand how I triumph in this hour, how the warm blood bounds through my veins, and my pulses throb with a mad desire to throttle you. Gods! how I hate you, man. What! listen to your lies and begin to doubt? Never, never. It is only your cowardly spirit—the spirit that stabs defenseless women, that asks such a respite."

Her words stung him to the quick.

"Were you a man I would give you the lie for that. I defy you to find one instance where Duncan ever failed to stand up for the weak and the right. As for my being a coward, ask one of these men here whether I am reckoned so along the coast. The man does not live who can say he ever saw Duncan, the Shark-Slayer tremble. I would have saved you, mad woman, from the crime of murdering the man who was once your husband, and who never knowingly raised a hand to harm you. I do not ask for mercy. Strike, and end this farce."

The woman's whim seemed to change.

She replaced the dagger, and arose.

"No, I will not kill you myself; but leave you to the mercy of these men of El Morte. They know how to slay. When I am gone from the house they will put you out of your misery. I simply wished you to know from whom the blow came that sent you to your death. This is the vengeance of a wronged woman. Would that the sins of every man could have as speedy a retribution."

"Amen to that!"

It was the Shark-Slayer who uttered this fervent amen, and the woman gave a low cry as she regained her feet. Possibly the first faint gleam of doubt was beginning to make itself felt in her breast; but if so, she stifled it, and with a few words to the men, and a taunting laugh intended to reach the ears of the prostrate man she went out, shutting the door after her.

Duncan was left alone with his enemies.

The three men who had borne him to the spot were grim fellows, to whom this adventure was relished as something to give spice to the monotony of their lives, and no mercy need be looked for from them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DUEL WITH CUCHILLOS.

SINCE the men had laid their captive down upon the floor of the lone cabin he had made some unseemly struggles, and the result of these had been that he had loosened the rope around his arms.

When they were carrying him this had become slack and an exertion on Duncan's part about the time they reached the cabin had rendered it more so.

No sooner had the vengeful Muriel arisen to her feet and while she was having a few parting words with the three desperadoes, than Duncan noiselessly but hastily pulled one arm free and then the other.

Thus he was enabled inside of ten seconds to draw the now slack rope until it was wholly gathered about his waist and his limbs perfectly free.

This was all that saved him from a terrible death, for the desperadoes did not lose much time in seeking to put their orders into execution. Duncan felt one of them drop beside him, and a hand fell upon his bosom as though seeking the proper place to send a knife in order to end life.

The critical moment had arrived.

With one hand he caught the upraised arm, while the other clutched the throat of the scoundrel bending over him. As the man drew back the natural result was that he drew the Shark-Slayer to a sitting posture. Duncan did not allow the momentum to cease there but bounding up he hurled the fellow over and fell heavily upon him.

Then loosening that fearful clutch on the man's windpipe he snatched the knife away from the guerrilla's palsied hand.

The next instant there was an awful blow, a gurgling cry that ended in a moan, and the work was done. Both of the other men had heard that sound too often not to know that it meant a human life had been sent out of the world.

"Have you finished him, Carlos? *Vamos!* that cry sent a shudder through me. That was a good stroke. Is the Shark-Sticker dead, *compañero!*" asked one of the men.

"No, he is not dead," came a voice that made the two devils jump and quake, "and what is more he does not mean that either of you shall leave this cabin alive. You trapped a Tartar when you carried Duncan here. Say your prayers, tigers, for I will be at you in a minute with this *cu-hillo* of your dead friend. I have now barred the door—there is no escape. Say your prayers and prepare to die."

Low cries of cowardly fear broke from the two men.

They were genuine desperadoes, brave enough around the camp-fire, and very valiant when the deed in question was sending a bullet into the back of a lonely and unsuspecting traveler, but in the face

of a real and tangible danger a mighty fear came upon them.

The dexterity of the Shark-Slayer with the knife was a matter of universal knowledge in and around San Miguel. Who was there but at some time or other had not seen him give battle to a man-eating shark, or hurl the blade with such exact precision as to split a bullet fastened to a tree a dozen paces away?

To be shut up in a dark cabin with this man then, armed as he was with the knife of their comrade, and hear his oath of vengeance ringing in their ears was enough to make the two men tremble.

How Duncan had managed their comrade they had not the slightest idea, and to their minds it even smacked of magic. They had last seen him with the rope wrapped about his body and limbs so that to all appearance he could not move a particle. The sounds they had heard had come, they believed, until they were undeceived by the Shark-Slayer's words, from the struggle Duncan made at being killed, and both had been positive that the knife-stroke had let out the life of the man they hated.

It was thus the truth burst upon them with all its horrors.

The consciousness that they were two to one did not revive their sinking spirits. Were there four times as many the case would not have been materially altered, for there would then have been a chance of their slaying each other in the dark, while the enemy could strike out right and left with impunity, having no fear of striking friends.

That the Shark-Slayer meant what he said they only knew too well. He was a man of his word.

The door was shut and barred—there could be no escape in that quarter, and they knew no other means of leaving the cabin.

Hark! what was that?

They could hear Duncan creeping toward them with the tread of a cat. Only the creaking of the boards beneath his weight betrayed his presence to them. Each instant he drew nearer and nearer, while the two trembling wretches, with hushed breath and quaking knees, crouched to receive him. Even a coward, when cornered, will fight, and sometimes more desperately than a brave man, such is the courage born of despair.

Then the sounds ceased. Around them reigned a silence that chilled them to the marrow, so indicative was it of the grim, ghastly horrors of death.

Where was the Shark-Slayer? Could he see them when they failed to detect the first sign of his presence in the Styx-like gloom that enshrouded the interior of the cabin?

They knew there were some men who were possessed to some degree of the remarkable faculty given to the cat tribe, whereby they can see in the dark. Was Duncan one of these gifted persons?

Unable to longer hold their breath they panted like two wolves wearied with the chase, such was the hold the excitement had upon them.

At last there came the action they had expected yet dreaded. The man with the knife leaped upon them much as a jaguar might have done. Muriel had called him a coward. Heaven knows a braver man than Duncan McGregor never drew breath, and his action now proved it, for instead of making his escape from the cabin when the opportunity was his, after killing the first desperado he had actually barred himself in with the remaining two in order that he might punish them as they deserved, or at least the best side win.

When he leaped upon them after this savage fashion the men were close together.

The fellow with whom Duncan grappled slipped from his hold, but immediately after gave vent to a howl of agony for two knives pierced his vitals at the same time, one wielded by the pearl-diver, the other by his own comrade, who, lunging out in his mad fright succeeded in hastening the death of the wretch who first came in the way.

Another period of silence ensued, broken only by the groans of the expiring wretch upon the floor of the cabin.

The other fellow had succeeded in reaching the door and was endeavoring to take out the bar without betraying his design to his foe; but in his deadly fear he trembled so much that it shook and rattled in his clasp.

He knew the Shark-Slayer was creeping up on him even though he could not see through the gloom. The agony was intense, and the strain too much for the wretch who finally with a cry dropped the bar and sprung away. Just in time too, for even then the pearl-diver was leaping through the air to bury his deadly blade in his heart.

Round and round the interior of the dark cabin the two men rushed like crazed beings. Relentless as a tiger Duncan kept up the pursuit.

The racket they raised was fearful. Now one and now the other would fall over a dead form in the way and come down with a crash, but only to be up again like a flash. This way and that the agonized guerrilla leaped, but the pursuer was ever on his heels.

He died a dozen deaths in that mad chase in the dark. The Shark-Slayer was determined to push this bloody business to the end, and the more the wretch eluded him the more persistent he was in the pursuit.

It could not last much longer. The guerrilla gave tongue continually, but not like a hound hot upon the trail. He cursed and entreated and howled by turns, until it was evident that his mind was almost turned with fright.

Finally there was a plunge more desperate than any that had preceded it, a confused jumble of noises, and then silence came upon the scene—a silence that could have but one meaning—death.

By this time people had reached the outside of the cabin, the news having gone swiftly to the casino that something terrible was occurring in this quarter.

Men pounded upon the door and demanded admittance.

At first Duncan thought it was some more of his foes who were seeking his life, and hunting up a revolver from the body of a fallen guerrilla, he prepared to give them a hearty reception should they carry out their threat of breaking in the door in case he did not open.

Soon, however, he recognized one of the voices as belonging to a friend, and then he no longer hesitated.

When those outside saw the door suddenly open and the well-known figure of the Shark-Slayer framed within, the moonlight falling upon him, they were dumfounded.

It seemed hardly five minutes since they had seen him quit the casino, and yet it was evident that he had since gone through some serious adventure.

"A light here, my friends. There has been some bloody work done in this cabin," he said, quietly.

They quickly procured a torch and entered. Cries of horror and amazement rung out at the spectacle disclosed. Blood was everywhere—upon the floor and spattered upon the walls. Three men lay weltering in their gore—one stone-dead and the other two very seriously wounded, both insensible through fright and pain combined.

It seemed incredible to believe that one man had accomplished such terrible work, and he unarmed in the start, and the pearl-divers became more in awe respecting their leader than ever before.

He told them the story, briefly omitting all reference to Muriel, for that was a private matter, and simply saying that he had been lassoed and carried to the cabin so that he might be basely murdered, when, chancing to free his arms he had attacked the whole three of his foes, secured a knife, killed one, and then fastening the door so that the others could not escape had proceeded to administer a severe lesson to them.

The story though so simply told magnetized those who heard. It was rendered all the more striking because the proofs of its terrible truth lay before them.

At last the spell was broken and the welkin rung with vociferous cheers for the king of the pearl-divers. Duncan bore his honors meekly. He was not one to strut before an audience with pride, and glory in having taken life.

This latter was repulsive to him always when the life to be sacrificed was human, and only in self-defense could it be condoned. These desperadoes had carried things so long with a high hand, murdering and robbing right and left, that since the Government could not control them, every man had to be a law unto himself, and in this manner wipe out the stain that had been placed upon the pearl coast by their lawlessness.

From the shelter of a cabin near by, where the shadow concealed him, a man watched this scene with dilating eyes.

"He lives still—Duncan lives! Great Heaven! can nothing kill him? Is he proof against death? Three men as stout as himself, all armed and he bound and defenseless, yet he clears the ranch and lives. Ah! I lied when I called him a coward. A braver man never lived, and even I am obliged to confess it; still I hate him—he has wronged me, and though Satan conspires with him to defeat my ends I will have a terrible revenge. See how calmly he takes his honors while those hounds give tongue. Another man would glory in such a victory. Ah! once I loved him, and who could help it, but now the devil reigns in my bosom. My time will yet come—I will have his life."

Thus hissing the speaker strode away.

The words uttered through set teeth betrayed the identity of the person.

It was Muriel the woman who hated.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECRET EXPEDITION.

The hour had come at last.

Duncan had his plans arranged and was ready to carry them into effect. The home of the mountain guerrillas was to be assaulted, and that without delay.

So quiet had Duncan and the leading men among the pearl-divers carried on their plotting that very few people had any suspicion of the truth, and there was hardly any likelihood that any news of this kind could have come to the ears of the chief, though his men were very active in the town.

Just at dusk one evening the whole body of pearl-divers—who, for some unaccountable reason had refused to work that day—arrived in San Miguel.

This was not an uncommon thing in itself, but when the fact was ascertained that they had brought their women and children along with them, yes, even down to the dogs of San Mateo, the fact produced something of a sensation, for it had a deep meaning.

San Mateo had been deserted.

Most of the women had relatives in the town, and thither their husbands took them for temporary quarters, so that they might be entirely untrammelled in their actions, and once they started upon the war-path there would be no haunting fears of the defenseless ones left behind.

Meanwhile, Duncan was closeted with the doughty captain of the coast-guard while the pearl-divers were congregating, and securing quantities of ammunition and provisions to carry with them.

The soldier was amazed at this action on the part of Duncan, for he expected quite a little army of troops in a month, but he was a man of keen observation, and when the Shark-Slayer put the case plainly before him he saw what the advantage would be in this bold advance, and he applauded it.

On his part he agreed to collect what raw material he could along the coast, and under the score of men remaining to him form a home guard which could be drilled into something like efficiency. In doing this Duncan warned him to be careful whom he selected, as there were many sympathizers of the guerrilla chieftain in San Miguel, who, once in the little army might do much to demoralize it.

There were a couple of old brass cannon at the guard-house which could be utilized by throwing up intrenchments, and in this manner they might be able to defy any attempt on the part of the Vultures to destroy the town while so many of its defenders were away.

All this having been satisfactorily arranged, Duncan was ready to start.

He sought the grand plaza where his men were gathered and examined for himself the arms and rations with which each man was provided. This proving satisfactory, they set out just as the moon was peeping over the hills, two hours before midnight.

It was a solemn sight to the people of the town, for they remembered so well how sadly the

soldiers had fared when they went upon the war-path against Captain El Morte, and it seemed as though this little body of men must have no show whatever in the encounter that was before them, but they had great confidence in the man who led them he had already shown himself capable of supreme efforts, and there was that in his bearing and the enthusiasm of his followers who obeyed his slightest wish as though it were a law of the Medes and Persians that gave them hope.

The daring band would come back with perhaps many of its members missing, but if such a thing were within the power of mortal man, they would effect the destruction of El Morte and his gang of cut-throats.

Duncan had left a desire with the captain to immediately post his men around the town and allow no man to leave San Miguel during the night, if such a thing could possibly be accomplished, for he felt sure that some spy of El Morte, upon learning what was meant by the expedition, would endeavor in some way to convey the information to his chief, and this was just what they did not wish to occur if there was any means of preventing it.

The bold band numbered fifty members in all, but they were hardy men, and had already proven how they could fight in the encounters already witnessed with the guerrillas, first in the casino, when the lights were put out and El Morte and his men only saved their lives by precipitate flight, and later on in the burnt chaparral, where they had chased the Vultures in all directions, breaking up their haunt in the cavern under the cliff, where Duncan had seen such thrilling adventures.

Such a band of determined men, under the leadership of the Shark-Slayer, who knew no such word as fear, could certainly do more damage to the guerrillas than ten times their number of soldiers, floundering about amid the fastnesses of the coast mountains, and continually eluded by those they sought because of their clumsy movements.

They had reached a point about a mile from the town, when suddenly a little form appeared at Duncan's side and a hand was laid upon his arm.

"You will not be angry with me, Duncan?" said a soft voice in pleading tones that made Duncan start.

"What! you, Little Texas!" he cried, frowning.

"Yes, it is I. Nay, do not look so displeased, dear Duncan. I could not remain away when I knew you were seeking danger again. We have faced peril together in the past—do not then seek to send me back. I may be of service to you, for no one knows the mountains better than Little Texas, much of whose life has been spent among them."

The Shark-Slayer was sorely puzzled, and knew not which course he should adopt. To send the young girl back he knew would be a harder task than it seemed, for in all probability she would only make a pretense of obeying him, to secretly follow the expedition and be in at the death.

Making a virtue of necessity he reluctantly gave her permission to accompany them, and at the same time had her promise that she would avoid danger all that she could. Her presence gave him no little trouble in his mind, and yet when he realized that it was love for him that made the young girl thus leave a place of safety and boldly face danger, his anxiety was not unmixed with joy.

By midnight they had entered among the mountains and all around them the scenery was grand beyond description. The moon, now in her decline, hung in the eastern sky like a huge clipped coin, one edge being shorn of its roundness. The ridges stood out in misty prominence, with their wooded sides, never touched by the cold breath of Jack Frost, while between lay the mystic valleys where in olden times water-courses had run but through which at the present time only tiny streams meandered.

Here lay a dense forest, yonder stretched an unpassable chaparral. Above, the sharp rocks of the hills, continually growing wilder as the party left the coast further behind them, were outlined against the clear heavens in prominent silhouette. Gently murmured the soft breath of the zephyr. The air was balmy, and innumerable insects buzzed and hummed, making the air melodious with their chorus. Night birds called to each other and suddenly flapped their wings in flight at the approach of the expedition. Frogs croaked in the little marshes bordering the stream, and now and then the hiss of a serpent might have been heard as it crossed their path.

Like a great snake, the company of pearl-divers wound in and out along the sinuous length of the valley. Silence reigned among the men. They knew the desperate nature of the business upon which they were engaged, and this quiet that rested upon them was evidence in itself that they meant business.

Men more foolish would have entered upon this expedition with great pomp and boasting. Still waters run deep, and when the guerrillas learned of the coming of this silent band they would be able to appreciate their danger.

Little Texas kept beside Duncan.

The men who had noticed her arrival had made no comment, for they respected the young border girl, and there was hardly one among them but who had seen the wonderful skill with which she could use her little rifle. This weapon had been left behind when the girl was captured on the former occasion, so that she had since recovered it, and it was now slung over her shoulder by the strap.

Through the solemn hours of the night the two-score and ten pearl-divers continued to advance.

They had left the valley which had been followed for some time, and were now passing over the roughest country imaginable, though it could be seen that there was a well-defined trail leading through it.

At the head of the pearl-divers strode the guide. He was a dark-browed Mexican who had penetrated to the secret stronghold of the guerrillas, and imparted his news to Duncan. The latter might have hesitated about trusting the expedition into the hands of any one man, but he knew this fellow was true as steel.

The guide, Antonio, had some years before lost a brother at the hands of the guerrillas, and ever since that time his heart had been full of bitter hatred for the Coast Vultures. What he had learned of their haunts was finally confided to Duncan, and this expedition was the result. Without such information the men of the pearl-fisheries could never have

moved against their foes, as once floundering in the labyrinth of chaparral and wilderness such as would greet them in the mountains they would be literally at the mercy of El Morte and his infamous gang.

The night was well advanced, and Duncan had been assured by his guide that they were now drawing near the peculiar valley in which El Morte and his men had their stronghold.

As yet they had seen or heard nothing to indicate that a suspicion of their presence in the vicinity had been aroused in the mind of the bandit leader. Another hour and their object would have been attained. Once the outlaws were surprised, they could very easily accomplish their design.

Unknown to them, there was a moving figure ahead—the dark figure of a man dressed as a Mexican. He was moving down a little defile as though intrusted with some message upon which he was intent, when he suddenly pricked up his ears. There had reached him the unmistakable sound of a sneeze, followed by an exclamation.

He came to a halt, and craned his neck in the endeavor to look ahead. Then a low exclamation broke from his lips. It was a cry of mingled astonishment and alarm.

The dark, moving, serpentine line had come within the range of his vision, and it had startled him. As what appeared to be the truth burst upon his mind, the Mexican scudded away to the shelter of the neighboring bushes, whence he could see without running the risk of himself being discovered.

Hardly a minute passed by ere the pearl-divers had reached the spot he had so recently occupied. At the head of the column was a man whom the guerrilla recognized. Antonio had been in the camp of the mountain outlaws, but had played his part so well, having their entire destruction in view, that El Morte and his men had believed him sincerely one of them in heart.

This very fellow who crouched in the bushes had been particularly duped by Antonio, and when by the light of fair Luna he recognized the "traitor," as he termed him, at the head of the pearl-divers, and comprehended how they had all been hoodwinked by the man, his rage made him fairly tremble.

He gnashed his teeth and spluttered over a string of silent invectives that would have surely murdered the object at whom they were leveled, had oaths the power to slay.

A sudden resolution came upon him.

Could he not escape after sending a bullet through the man who was leading the pearl-divers to the retreat of El Morte? The trial was worth the candle. At any rate, the report of his escopeta would alarm the guerrilla sentries near the stronghold. His mind was made up, the man in the bushes raised his gun and took aim.

CHAPTER XXVI.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THE moon was shining brightly, with not a cloud in the sky to intercept her silvery rays, and at this very moment the column had halted just within the defile for a brief rest, so that everything favored the chances of the guerrilla.

There suddenly burst upon the night-air a heavy report not unlike the discharge of a small mountain howitzer, and from the bushes at one side of the little defile there issued forth a sheet of flame like the tongue of some monster of medieval times.

Almost simultaneously with this crash Antonio the guide was seen to throw up his arms, and uttering a piercing cry fall to the ground, fairly riddled by the quantity of deadly missiles contained in the escopeta of the Mexican guerrilla.

The eyes of all were instantly turned to the point whence the fatal shot had come which had deprived them of their guide.

When the guerrilla took upon himself the task of attempting to thwart the designs of the Shark-Slayer, he had calculated that the command would be thrown into a state of demoralization by his sudden shot, and that, by taking advantage of this state of affairs he might make his escape.

In this, however, he counted without his host.

The pearl-divers were at once on the alert, and half a dozen immediately bounded toward the spot from whence the murderous shot had proceeded. A dark figure was seen to rise out of the bushes and dart away. It was the assassin. They could have shot him down on the spot, but Duncan's orders had been that not a weapon was to be fired. Enough damage had in all likelihood already been done by the roar of the guerrilla's escopeta.

Like sleuth-hounds that had been loosed from the leash they threw themselves upon the track of the fleeing guerrilla, and the whole of them at once passed from the sight of the main body, clustered around their leader.

Intently they listened. The sounds of the night came to their ears from all directions, but for a time nothing else. Ha! was that a cry of anguish that came floating through space? If so, it must have been cut short in its utterance, for one could easily have mistaken it for the singular scream of some nocturnal bird.

Three minutes later the men who had gone bounding away up the side of the ravine after the dark form of the assassin once more reappeared.

They were panting as though the exertion had been severe.

One of them held a naked *machete* in his hand, but when the moon's rays fell upon the blade they did not glint from its sheen. The steel was discolored. No words were necessary, for when the man held his weapon significantly before the Shark-Slayer the latter understood that it was the life-blood of the guerrilla that dimmed the steel of the half sword.

"It is well," he said, simply.

No time was to be lost. The guide, Antonio, was riddled with slugs, and to all appearance dead, but they had now gotten so far that the expedition would not be a failure because of his loss.

He had drawn a rude map for Duncan of the vicinity and the Shark-Slayer had confidence in his ability to take charge of the expedition entirely from this point on.

"Forward was the word, and on they swept.

One thing alone was to be feared. The report of the assassin's escopeta at this dead hour of the night would be apt to arouse suspicion among the guerrilla sentries. If the men of El Morte were once alarmed, and given time to take position on the

commanding walls that overlooked the route to the inclosed valley, there would be lost much of the advantage Duncan had hoped to gain.

Still, all that remained for them was to push boldly forward and trust to Providence for the rest. Their cause was just and their confidence great in the man who led them.

Sounds now came to them from beyond that seemed to prove their fears in this respect anything but groundless. Shouts were heard distinctly in the clear mountain air, and the reports of three guns in rapid succession told of some signal.

Without a doubt the guerrillas had taken the alarm. It was a question now as to which of them would reach the great defile first. If El Morte and his men, then the cause of the invaders would be beset by difficulties which it must needs tax them to overcome. On the other hand could the pearl-divers climb the heights commanding the pass ere the guerrillas issued forth from the valley and manned their works at this point, El Morte's band would be cooped up in their inclosed stronghold, and it would probably only be a question of time as to when they should be compelled to give in or be wiped out.

Straining every muscle the men of the coast dashed on after their leader, realizing the vital importance of this first step, for as Duncan had not dreamed of discovery he had calculated upon the capture of the heights as a surety, necessary to the carrying out of his well-laid plans.

The heights were now looming up before them on each side of the canyon through which the trail ran. Voices could be heard above—the voices of the alarmed sentries, who had now caught sight of the dark advancing mass. As yet the main body of guerrillas had not come up, but there was no telling how soon they would be on hand.

Up, up went the Shark-Slayer, without a moment's rest or hesitation, and at his heels followed his brave men.

They knew that possibly they were rushing into the jaws of death—that should the main body of the guerrillas reach the heights above when they were half-way up there would be poured down upon them such fearful showers of leaden missiles that would sweep them backward in a demoralized mass, perhaps deprived of their bold leader, but the exigency of the moment demanded prompt action, and so long as Duncan led them on they were ready to assail the gates of hell itself.

Upward they went, not in a solid mass, for the nature of the ground forbade that, but singly or in couples, each man climbing for himself, his gaze bent eagerly upward, and seizing with eager hand anything that would further his progress, be it rock, root or bush.

The Shark-Slayer was ever in the van.

Above them could still be heard the excited voices of the four sentries gathered at this one point, as they called wildly to their comrades to make haste, or shouted to each other words of encouragement or command.

Huge rocks began to make their appearance, which, leaping over the out-jutting projections, crashed amid the bushes with a fury equal almost to cannon-balls. More than one man had a narrow escape from instant death in this particular, but not a particle did the deluge of stones stay their upward progress.

And now the rattle of fire-arms was heard.

The guerrilla sentinels had caught sight of the advancing foe, and were beginning to pour in a hot fire. Even this only served to make the dash more impetuous.

What a spectacle the brave storming of a height ever presents. The soft light of the moon shaded harshness in this present instance, but the men above were desperate fellows, and those advancing toward the crest knew not the word, "fear."

They could not rush forward as they would have liked, for the hill swayed up like a wall before them. They dashed forward a little way, then slackened their speed to creep up hand over hand at some unusually severe spot.

Flames baptized them from the crest now just before them, the whistle of deadly bullets sounded in their ears, but not checked by the avalanche of thundering rocks, they were not to be stayed now by this hurricane of lead.

One more little elevation remained to be surmounted, and then the crest of the bridge would be won.

As yet the main body of guerrillas had not put in an appearance, and the chances seemed to favor the bold invaders. There was a headlong charge of maddening fury, and then Duncan and his leading men dashed into the very flames that issued from the guns of the guerrilla sentries crouching bravely behind the breastwork of stone and earth crowning the height.

Like tigers the pearl-divers leaped upon the men who had thus resisted to the last. In that moment of fury their bravery would not save them from death.

Seeing that the last hope of holding the height until the coming of their comrades had been swept away, the guerrillas would have fled; but they waited too long, and every man of them fell beneath the avenging weapons of those who had carried the ridge by storm, to pay for the pearl-divers who had fallen upon the steep slope before the rocks and bullets showered down so mercilessly by the four sentry vedettes.

There was no time to be lost even now.

Just beyond could be heard the roar of approaching voices—El Morte and his Vultures were coming up the other side of the ridge on the run. Whatever the men in the valley may have thought when the alarm was first given by the firing of the three guns, that it was not a false one they had now discovered. The terrible roar that had since reached their ears had caused them to put forth every effort in the endeavor to gain the height in time, knowing their probable doom if the attempt was a failure.

On they came, sweeping up the incline in a dense mass.

There was only one place where the height could be scaled from this side; but it was much easier than the ascent made by the men of the coast in the face of the opposition from above, so that the outlaws swept forward in a tidal wave that seemed irresistible.

Duncan had immediately arranged his men behind

the rude breastworks on the crest of the ridge, which would serve as a means of shelter just as well from one side as another, and here they waited for the oncoming foe.

The sudden cessation of musketry fire and wild yells might have warned the guerrillas as to the true state of affairs had they noticed it; but they were making such a fearful clamor among themselves that most of them had ears for nothing else.

Behind the rocks crouched the men of the coast, ready to pour in a deadly fire among their foes. The brilliant and successful assault of the ridge had fired their blood, their eyes gleamed madly like those of enraged panthers, and their breath came in jerks, such had been the violent exertion of climbing the height, but they held their rifles in a firm grip, and only waited until the guerrillas came a little closer ere pouring into their midst a fierce fire that must hurl them back in disorder.

Five seconds passed by.

Then a sheet of fire ran along the stone wall and the crackling of musketry-fire boomed forth, speedily merging into a roar that awoke the mocking echoes of the mountains.

Wild cries arose from the guerrillas through whose ranks the deadly missiles from almost two-score of guns tore with fearful effect. They became panic-stricken at the awful nature of the doom that threatened them. Even the personality of their foes was unknown to them, although they might have good and reasonable suspicions on this score.

"Charge, my brave boys!"

The voice rung out above the occasional bang of a gun or the shouts of the distracted guerrillas. Ha! well did they know to whom those stentorian tones belonged. It was to Duncan, the Shark-Slayer, and his men of the pearl-fisheries that they were then indebted for this night surprise and assault.

Although taken unawares, El Morte did not lose all hope.

He was an able leader, and when the pearl-divers charged with such overwhelming fury, he handled his men so well that while they retreated precipitately before the mad onslaught of their foes, they held well together and avoided a panic. This was all that saved them.

The pearl-divers followed close upon their heels until they saw a second breastwork stronger than the first, behind which the guerrillas had taken refuge.

At the same time there was a vivid flash, followed by a deafening crash, and a charge of grape-shot tore through the bushes, just missing the leading assailants. Duncan knew there was also a second cannon there—the weapons had been captured from the military force sent against El Morte some years before, and of which frequent mention has been made in these pages—and fearing lest another discharge might cut off half his men he gave the order to withdraw to the heights again, confident that his plans thus far had worked admirably and that the guerrillas of the mountains were now shut up in a death-trap.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BORDER WARFARE.

MORNING came on apace.

Duncan had counted his losses and found that he had two men killed, while four were wounded, one seriously. The wounds of all were looked after, and then they sought rest for an hour or two, knowing that the guerrillas could not do aught toward effecting their escape from the trap.

With the coming of dawn the Shark-Slayer was on the alert, and from his elevated position proceeded to take a view of the field where all future operations were to be conducted.

The valley in which El Morte and his band had taken up their head-quarters had apparently always been one of their abiding places, for here they kept their horses while making the cliff cavern a rendezvous.

It was surrounded on all sides by great cliffs which reared themselves heavenward to the height of several hundred feet, and at no point was this wall less than forty yards in stretch from the crown to the valley. A more singular freak of nature never greeted the eyes of man. It was as though a large patch of territory almost a square mile in extent had at some remote time sunk down into the earth, and settled at this depth, leaving a complete wall around it. Traces of volcanic origin could be seen upon the blackened rocks, and there were even discernible veins of sulphur and iron, forming layers of pyrites that would have given much information to a geologist concerning the past of this weird land, and possibly how the ground now forming this mysterious basin had dropped into the hollow of an extinct volcano that had burned itself out.

That must have been centuries ago, for there was now a luxuriant growth in the strange valley.

Duncan did not bother himself concerning the probable origin of the basin. It was enough for him that it lay there, and that his mortal foes were in possession of it.

He drew out a field-glass with which he had come provided and surveyed every foot of the valley and its environing cliffs that could be seen from his point of observation.

Everywhere the walls were the same—smooth and utterly beyond the power of being scaled. Men might enter the valley by means of a long rope swung over the lowest portion of the cliff, but it would be impossible for them to get out unless the way had been previously prepared.

That this had not been done by the guerrillas, he had received positive information from the guide, Antonio. Had El Morte suspected an attack he would certainly have provided for such an emergency; but the guerrillas had been caught napping, and would already have been gobbled up entirely had it not been for the precaution of posting sentries whether danger menaced or not, and the accidental discovery of the advancing column of pearl-divers by the bandit who had sacrificed his life in order to warn his comrades of the approaching peril.

In one quarter only was there a means of entering the sunken valley, and the canyon under the heights held by the pearl-divers led to this opening.

This was now guarded by the guerrillas, who had one of their guns commanding the approach by

the canyon, while the other bore upon the slope down which they had rushed before the charge of the men of the coast.

The entrance to the valley was not over fifteen yards in width, and could easily be held by the force El Morte had under him so long as they retained possession of the guns, for should the pearl-divers assault, the discharge into their midst of these engines of death, loaded with grape or canister, would be apt to mow down half or two-thirds their number, a fact Duncan realized full well when he saw the rays of the sun, reflected from the dead wall of the cliff, fall upon the two brass pieces with which the enemy were supplied.

Even at that early moment in the siege the fact was plain to his mind that those field-pieces must be captured ere the grand victory could be won, and he resolved to devote his time to maturing a plan for their downfall.

That his position in that elevated and exposed spot was none of the safest Duncan soon had evidence, for he heard the distant report of a gun, saw the white smoke puff up from behind the guerrilla breastworks, and then the dirt was plowed up almost at his feet by the ball.

Even as he turned to leave the spot, having seen all that he desired for the time being, a second bullet went singing merrily past his head just six inches too high. It was evident, however, that the guerrilla marksmen were speedily getting his range, and that a third shot would possibly accomplish the dire object with which it was fired, so he hastily withdrew from sight.

Orders were given to the pearl-divers to keep a close watch upon the enemy and fire upon any one who exposed himself, but at the same time to remain concealed themselves, for it was known that there were some expert sharpshooters among El Morte's men, who would be apt to do much damage with their rifles if given the opportunity.

During the day it was no unusual thing to hear the crack of a gun, and sometimes several reports sounded in unison as the men discovered a chance to place a bullet where it would tell, caused perhaps by some daring guerrilla whisking into view in a moment of reckless bravado.

The distance was so great, however, that even if a man exposed himself, the bullets fired in haste were apt to go astray, and thus, although much powder was exploded along both lines very little damage was inflicted.

About the middle of the afternoon the guerrillas introduced a bolder system of warfare. A number of them had managed to gain the shelter of the shrubbery that grew along the slope, and creeping up under cover of this they were enabled to draw very near the enemy's line.

The first the pearl-divers knew of this new and brilliant project was when the bullets began to tell. Wounds were received at the least exposure. A man raising his hat above the stone wall had it torn from his grasp by two or three balls that struck it simultaneously.

Such firing from the enemy's line was utterly out of the question and an investigation proved the truth of this. The shots came from points half-way down the slope, and it became evident that the enemy occupied the chaparral in force.

Duncan selected a dozen of his best shots and withdrew with them some little distance down the height which they had carried so valiantly on the preceding night. Making a long detour the little band managed to struggle across the wild crest of the ridge which grew perfectly impassable beyond this point.

Their movements had been very cautious, and they had good reason to believe that they had not been seen.

Advancing along the other slope they finally sighted several of the bold guerrillas. Confident that they had a way of retreat open to them in case of necessity, these fellows had advanced even further since the pearl-divers had left their comrades, and at the time Duncan and his men caught sight of them they were crouching behind logs and rocks, from whence they delivered the fire that had been telling so heavily upon their enemies.

Unconscious of their peril these fellows continued to keep their eyes glued upon the rampart above, and were only aroused to a realization of their danger when the rifles of Duncan's men began to play a lively tune in their rear. Then a panic seized upon the sharpshooters. They found themselves in a trap with enemies in the front and rear. If they screened their bodies in one quarter it was to expose them in another, and in this sad dilemma the only course left them was to fly and trust to good fortune to save them.

Away they went like mad down the slope, scattering in a variety of directions, though all heading toward the one point, and leaping over logs, rocks and bushes as though they were wild deer chased by the hounds.

Shots rung out behind them, and that these were not all thrown away was evidenced in the cries that arose, and the fact that more than one of the mad racers tumbled headlong in his flight. They had found to their cost that it was a poor rule that could not be made to work both ways.

The pearl-divers held the slope during the remainder of the afternoon, and it was a dangerous thing for a guerrilla to show his head above the rampart protecting the single entrance to the strange valley, for Duncan and his men watched the line of works so closely that not the slightest movement on the part of the enemy escaped their observation.

Thus the day wore gradually away.

When the dusk of evening came the Shark-Slayer matured a plan, which, if properly carried out, must give them the possession of the guns, and at the same time insure their ultimate triumph over the enemy.

The majority of the pearl-seekers made their way along the top of the ridge in plain sight of the guerrillas, who could see their movements through the gathering shades of evening.

They did not fire upon the moving figures, evidently at a loss to understand what it all meant, for almost the full force of pearl-divers were thus marshaled before them.

In ten minutes time the dusk had changed to darkness, and when it was no longer possible for the guerrillas to see what they were about, Duncan brought a stop to his farce.

All of his men quietly returned to the spot where they had been lying through the day, with the exception of four, who were under particular orders to move or make a partial detour of the sunken basin, arriving at that point where the walls were lowest. This was possible, as Duncan had discovered by means of his field-glass, for close to the verge the surface of the rock was smooth and could easily be passed over.

When these three men reached the point specified they were to lower a rope as though about to descend, and then in some manner apparently unwittingly attract the attention of the guerrillas. The latter, putting the two facts together would very naturally jump at the conclusion that the pearl-divers had changed their base and were about to attack from another quarter.

Hence they would withdraw most of their men from the works at the entrance of the valley, and proceed to gobble up the enemy as fast as they presented themselves at the end of the dangling rope.

This was just what Duncan hoped for.

As soon as he had received some indication that they had fallen into the cunning trap set for them, he was ready to lead a vigorous assault upon the ramparts and carry them at the point of the machete or the muzzle of the revolver.

In the mean time the storming-party, under cover of the darkness, descended the slope as far as the cover would permit, and then lay down within thirty yards of the earthworks of the enemy, to await the result of the trick.

The time passed slowly. Such was the darkness that those who had been given the task of deceiving the men of El Morte found it more of a task than they had bargained for, and in order to avoid any terrible mishap, such as falling over the brink to the earth two hundred feet below, they were compelled to move very slowly, foot by foot as it were.

It was one thing to survey the path by daylight and conclude that it did not present any serious difficulties, and to pass over it in the midst of inky darkness, the route being utterly unknown, and their proximity to the edge of the cliff at times not dreamed of until one of them discovered that there was an empty void in front of him, the staff he carried for such purposes of investigation meeting no solid.

In this way they made slow progress.

What they had calculated to do in one hour took three times as long, and the moon had actually arisen before they reached the place designated as the scene of their operations.

Duncan and his men waited at first composedly, but as the time slipped by without any sign, their impatience began to make itself known. The rising of the moon annoyed the Shark-Slayer not a little, as he did not desire her bright light.

Finally, an hour before midnight, he uttered a glad exclamation.

"The signal at last!" he whispered, hoarsely.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BATTLE IN THE MYSTIC VALLEY.

THE time for action was close at hand.

Through the space that intervened had come a shrill whistle that could have been heard a mile away. It was the signal agreed upon between Duncan and the four men whom he had sent around to that portion of the valley where the cliffs were lower than at any other point.

They had finally reached their destination, and were ready to commence business. The first thing to be done was to attract the attention of the guerrillas and give them to understand that an assault was to be made on the valley from this quarter. Great care had to be exercised in order that they might not suspect the true state of affairs, for this would ruin all.

Duncan himself as soon as he heard that signal, crept down the slope and up to the very breastwork behind which the enemy lay waiting. Here he crouched, almost holding his breath and listening for some sign from within.

It was not long in coming.

From the hurried exclamations that reached his ears he knew that the guerrillas had jumped to the conclusion which he most earnestly desired should become a conviction with them.

A man was at once dispatched to the suspected point. Being a fleet runner, he soon came back and brought startling news. There was already a rope dangling from the top to the base of the cliff. At the time he had left the spot none of the pearl-divers had as yet descended, but there could be no telling when they would come down, for he had heard the clank of arms and the confused bustle of preparation above.

This was the news the messenger brought.

At first it rather staggered the leader of the Vultures, for he realized that his position was not impregnable after all when these dare-devils of pearl-divers were concerned.

Had it been the soldiers of the realm no attempt would have been made to enter the valley. Finding themselves balked by the cannon planted at the mouth of the narrow entrance they would undoubtedly have squatted down in camp and continued the siege until the guerrillas either decamped unawares or else tried their patience out.

With the men of the pearl-fisheries, they had to deal with a far different class. Once the plan was arranged they would think nothing of sliding down the rope and thus entering the valley.

The danger was imminent. It must be bravely met. The best qualities of a general are to draw victory from a seeming defeat.

So thought El Morte, and as a brilliant idea flashed into his mind he recovered instantly from the staggering blow he had received when assured that the enemy was without a doubt about to enter the sunken valley by the rear door.

What was to hinder them from going in force to the spot where the threatening preparation was being made, and capturing their foes one by one as they descended? Nothing whatever, and the opportunity of striking such a telling blow was open before them.

It was possible that by this time quite a number of the expert and agile pearl-divers had descended into the valley, so that it would be advisable for El Morte to take with him a sufficient force to do battle if such a thing were necessary.

Duncan heard the low order given.

He chuckled to himself as he realized how the men were falling into the trap so neatly set. In ten minutes the mystic valley would virtually be in the possession of the invaders.

The pearl-diver only waited until he had heard El Morte and his followers pass away into the valley, making all haste toward the threatened spot, and then he slowly made his way back to his waiting companions.

According to the best calculation he could arrive at the number of those remaining could not be more than eight or ten. He took double that number with him, and led them back to the works he had so recently left.

The task was no easy one, for the moonlight was bright in most places, and the sheltering herbage scant, while the eyes of the guerrillas were known to be keen. Should one of the crawling pearl-divers be discovered, all might be lost, or at least the work be rendered doubly hard, for in making the approach they had to pass in direct range of the two guns which would doubtless work havoc among them if discharged at such time as they were passing their muzzles.

Fortunately, at this juncture, so critical to those who were crawling forward like snakes in the grass, the attention of the guerrillas back of the breastwork was pretty thoroughly taken up with the valley in their rear.

Never dreaming of an assault in the front they turned their eyes upon that portion of the cliff where it was believed that the pearl-divers were about to make an attack, and which could be indistinctly seen, as through a mist, the moonlight showing outlines without betraying particulars.

So far all worked well.

Gradually Duncan gathered his men under the wall that had been built principally of great stones fallen from time to time from the face of the cliff, but filled in here and there with earth. It was of such thickness that it might even have resisted a cannon-ball, although a regular pounding of shot would undoubtedly have soon made a breach.

All was ready now for the final act in the drama.

Duncan saw that his men had their weapons out—a bright *machete* in one hand and a revolver in the other.

Some ten minutes had passed since El Morte had left the spot, ample time for the guerrillas to have reached the threatened point. They were, in fact, at that very moment crouching under the cliff, at the place where the dangling rope had been discovered, waiting for the first victim to show himself, and listening, while they laughed in their sleeves, to the discussion of the men above, who, acting as if in charge of the enemy, were contending in regard to the honor of being the first one to enter and take possession of the valley.

While the wily El Morte and his score of men crouched in the bushes and among the rocks below, chuckling at the neat trap that had been set for their enemies, they were suddenly amazed to hear wild yells arising from the entrance of the valley, where the guns were posted.

Nor was this all.

Shots followed the shouts, and mingled with them. The clash of steel smiting steel could also be heard, while yells of pain and alarm made a pandemonium of sounds.

There could be but one explanation to this infernal din, and the truth, flashing upon the mind of El Morte, came near paralyzing him. Too late he comprehended the ingenious device made use of by the Shark-Slayer to deceive those in the valley. Long ere the main body of guerrillas could reach the theater of action the fight would be over, and considering the small number of men left there, together with the fact that they had undoubtedly been unable to use the guns, but one result could ensue.

The battery must fall.

That in the hands of the foe, and the valley would be no longer tenable, yet the brigands could not escape from it.

No wonder El Morte, usually so full of ideas and prompt to action, was now almost paralyzed with the blow he had received, and the conviction that the Vultures were doomed.

To add to their distraction, the four men above, knowing that their services were no longer required in the role they had assumed, and having discovered where the guerrillas lay, began to hurl great fragments of rock down from their elevated position. These weapons of destruction crashed in the bushes all around El Morte and his men, and were at least the means of stirring them out of the lethargy into which they appeared to have been thrown by the assault on the barricade.

Away they went from their covert like a covey of alarmed game birds, but their leader soon drew them together with his voice, and racing like mad they made toward the entrance of the valley, hoping to reach the barricade ere the action was over, and hurling their force upon the assailants crush them.

They hoped in vain, however.

When Duncan had given the signal to his brave men, they sprung up the barricade like monkeys strictly avoiding the two openings through which the brass field pieces frowned.

The Mexicans within, turning at this moment, were amazed and horrified to see the dark figures of the pearl-divers swarming over the breastwork, but they proved themselves anything but cowards, and with shouts received the assault.

Then for a time there was a sharp engagement.

Steel struck steel with clink and clank—revolvers rung out and all the sounds of a sturdy fight could be heard.

The assailants were two to one and could never have carried the battery in the daytime, when those defending it would have been able to have decimated their number easily through the aid of the two cannons and their smaller arms ere they gained the works; but as all this had been avoided through the mastery skill of Duncan, the advantage was greatly with his men.

Realizing the utter desperation of their cause, for these men would show no mercy to prisoners, their war-cry being "vengeance for the mutilation of the women," the Vultures were ready to fight to the last gasp, and die to the last man.

This prolonged the affair much more than would have been the case in ordinary warfare, where the

men finding themselves overpowered would have thrown down their arms and making a virtue of necessity, surrendered.

Some of the encounters were particularly ferocious, for the guerrillas died hard, and several of the pearl-divers were placed *hors de combat* ere the end came.

One man in particular held out against all odds. He was a giant in size and wielded a heavy *machete* with the power of a Hercules. One blow from it severed an ordinary weapon and cleft the skull of the unfortunate man who had raised it to defend his head from a threatened stroke.

In the midst of the struggle about this fellow and two others, who, back to back, seemed capable of beating off as many of their foes as could manage to get a stroke at them, the very number of the pearl-divers retarding each other's movements, loud shouts were heard not far away that were answered by the hoarse voice of the giant guerrilla.

El Morte was near at hand.

He and his men could be heard thrashing through the bushes, and bellowing to their comrades to keep up the good fight a couple of minutes longer, when they would be there to lend a helping hand and wipe out the dogs of Shark-Stickers.

Duncan was alive to the exigency of the moment.

Should this new force of a score of men, all the available strength of the guerrillas be hurled upon his little company, the attack would at least be a failure, not to speak of a possible final victory for El Morte's followers.

What was to be done in order to prevent a union?

"The guns!"

Ha! it was a brilliant thought, and worthy of trial. A voice had whispered it in his ear—a voice which he knew could belong to none other than Little Texas, although he had not seen her for several hours, and believed she was safe with the men on the heights above.

Quickly calling some of his men to him Duncan wheeled the field-pieces until they pointed the other way.

At his direction two pearl-divers seized fiery rods from the little brazier filled with lighted charcoal, and stood ready, one at each gun. Through the hazy, moonlit atmosphere a swarm of dark bodies could now be seen rushing through the bushes in the direction of the barricade.

They were the men of El Morte leaping to the battle.

Duncan sighted one gun, and then sprung to the other.

"Fire!" he cried.

Then came a terrific crash that shook the earth, and more than one rock fell from the towering cliffs around. The flash of fire seemed to leap through space half way to where the dark forms of the advancing guerrillas had been seen, as though to lick them with its deadly tongue of flame.

A great cloud of white smoke rolled heavenward. The weird echoes jostled each other, growing fainter and fainter as if throttled in the fierce struggle for supremacy, and finally dying out far away amid the great mountain ranges.

Then followed a silence deep and profound.

It was the awful silence of death.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE BRINK OF ETERNITY.

HEAVEN alone knows what was in those cannon; but it fairly slaughtered the guerrillas. They had loaded the weapons for the benefit of the pearl-divers, but had been "hoist by their own petard."

At about the very moment when this double discharge made the air tremble, one of those engaged with the giant guerrilla managed to get a shot at him with a revolver, and succeeded in rendering his arm useless, so that with a bull-like bellow he had hurled himself upon his enemies, dashing them left and right with the suddenness of his attack, and making his escape from their clutches.

So sudden had been this assault that the men had not even followed him, and it was well for them they did not, for a reason speedily made manifest.

The fellow's evil destiny had undoubtedly overtaken him; for in dashing away from those who had so recently been his assailants he unfortunately took a course that led him across the path along which the two shotted cannon were sighted.

At the very instant of the discharge he came in line, and as a result was blown to pieces. He had escaped death in one form to meet his doom in another.

The other two guerrillas were speedily captured, and securely bound. Then Duncan set about making sure that there might be no opportunity for the remainder of the gang to escape from the place.

Breastworks were hastily thrown up in front of the guns, the rocks in the rear being used for that purpose, and the men who guarded the heights and pass were called in as there was no longer any need of their remaining in those positions when the foe was brought to the last ditch.

When morning came the valley could be bombarded if it was found that the guerrillas had another barricade at any point.

Investigation proved that the discharge of the cannon had done fearful execution among the bandits. Counting the giant who had been cut in pieces, ten dead men lay among the bushes near at hand, while bloody trails proved that the others had not escaped unscathed.

El Morte was not among the slain.

Fate was reserving him to the very last.

Knowing that they had nothing to fear from the sad remnant of the guerrilla gang, the pearl-divers prepared to seek rest, of which they were greatly in need.

Duncan posted sentries, threw out vedettes, and then the remainder of the brave band sought rest in slumber. During the night the sentries and pickets were changed so that all had an opportunity to be refreshed in sleep.

At early dawn Duncan received some news.

It seems that the men who had played the trick with the rope over the cliff, had guessed the true nature of the position when they heard the shouts of the guerrillas suddenly cease, and later on two of them descended to take a scout through the valley.

These two men now came in with their report.

The guerrillas were in a small cave under one of the cliffs, and determined to die there. In all they

numbered some ten men, but several were severely wounded, and would be of little service in a conflict.

El Morte himself had been struck by one of the missiles that had proceeded from the cannon, it was thought fatally at first, but presently he recovered, and his indomitable nature showed itself in his rising to his feet after being carried to the cavern, stanching the flow of blood from his wound, and once again assuming the command of his men.

This being the state of affairs, Duncan felt himself safe in taking one of the cannon and entering the valley. The other, in charge of six men, would be enough to guard the entrance to the valley while daylight lasted.

With some difficulty the men managed to pull the field-piece across the valley to the point where, as stated by the man who had acted as a scout, the cave was situated in which the remnant of the outlaw gang was concealed.

True enough, there could be seen a jagged opening in the face of the wall which might be a cave.

The cannon was planted in position, where it would bear upon the cave. Then Duncan sent a man forward to demand the surrender of those within, on penalty of instant bombardment in case they refused.

The messenger was greeted with coarse jeers and curses, and even a shot was fired at him as he turned away. He fell, arose, and with remarkable quickness, leaped out of range of the men within, who were desperate enough for anything.

This was too much for Duncan to stand.

He gritted his teeth savagely, and then commanded the man in charge of the field-piece to fire.

"Their blood be on their own heads, if they will have it so. We have them caged like wolves in a trap, and not a man of them shall leave this death valley alive. Fire!"

There came a deafening crash, and those who were looking, saw great fragments of stone at the mouth of the cavern fly into the air when the ball struck. A mocking laugh came from the caged desperadoes within. They were in the reckless humor which animates a doomed Indian tied to the torture-post, and with the blazing fagots around him to chant his death-song, and defy his executioners to wring from him a cry of pain.

The second shot, better aimed than the first, went into the mouth of the cave, and raised quite a rumpus there, though the cries speedily died out, and silence reigned again.

It chanced that the passage or crevice leading to the cave proper was slanting, so that all the balls did not find their way to where the guerrillas were hiding, but some ricocheted, and carried with them a multitude of splinters from the rocks that must have made it very unpleasant for the inmates.

Faster and more furious was the fire maintained, until cries of pain and deep groanings bubbled out from the cavern between shots.

Duncan a length could stand it no longer.

"Who will follow me into that devil's hole?" he cried.

There was no lack of volunteers, even though the men knew full well that all who went in would not creep out again—more than one man, in all probability, would have to be carried out by the heels, dead.

Selecting half a score of his best fighters, the Shark-Slayer made a flank movement and gained the side of the cave entrance.

After another shot had been fired, and while the echoes were still ringing their changes through the valley, he gave the signal, and into the opening they crept two abreast.

The hurtling solid six-pound shot had at least helped to enlarge the passageway, although here and there it was incumbered with debris over which they had to climb.

As they burst into the cave proper, a terrible spectacle met their view, and one which they would never forget.

There was dust in the air, coming from the powdering of the basaltic rock by the last cannon ball. A torch shed a fearful glare upon the little cave, being stuck in a crevice.

Several men lay upon the rocky floor dead or dying, and blood ran freely over the rocks. It was a picture cruel and bloody; surely a terrible retribution had come upon these crime-stained Vultures of the pearl-coast, whose reign had been so marked with foul deeds.

El Morte, wounded and white as a ghost, was the first to catch a glimpse of the pearl-divers as they entered, and with a fiendish yell he sprung out from behind the rocks where he had been in concealment, calling upon his men to die game.

The guerrillas realized that the last dread scene in the drama of blood had arrived, and they were as ready as their leader to take their share in its horrors. Down from various nooks and crannies they threw themselves, and in another moment the clash of arms was heard in that wall-ribbed den.

A horrid din arose—again sounded the smiting of steel, the quick percussion of blows, the muffled shot, the victorious shout, and the yell of acute agony as steel or lead cut to the heart.

It was terrible, as indeed must be every scene of battle, where men made in God's own image hack and shoot and stab each other with the ferocity of demons from hell.

In the midst of it all a small figure glided in at the entrance of the cave, unnoticed by all. Little Texas could not keep away when Duncan was in danger. He was her life, her all, and woe to the hand that was upraised against him.

At the start the Shark-Slayer had singled out El Morte, and as their *machetes* crossed with a spiteful hiss, the orbs of the guerrilla chieftain seemed to burn like coals of fire as they were fastened upon his antagonist.

"I see you know me now, Duncan McGregor. Yes, I am your cousin, Mortimer Elwood. I will never leave this place alive, but doomed as I am, I take a savage satisfaction in telling you what you may not have known before. It was I who alienated your wife's affections—I who ruined your business—I who made her think you a guilty wretch when you were innocent as a babe unborn—I who enraged her mind against you until she hunted the world over to vent her vengeance upon you. Ha! ha! I have had a sweet revenge for your insults of the past. I care not now what comes. Have at you, cousin mine. It is your blood or mine."

Thus he shouted as he lunged and parried with a

strength born of despair, for his wound had drained away much of his blood and the natural strength with it.

There was a cry which nobody noticed, coming from a niche in the wall above the floor, where a white face looked down upon the two combatants—the countenance of Don Pablo, whom we now know as Muriel, the wife of the Shark-Slayer from whom he had been estranged many years, and whom he had until very recently had good reason to believe was dead.

She had heard the words uttered by El Morte and the truth had stunned her.

All these years she had hunted Duncan McGregor as one who had foully wronged her, disbelieving his calm avowal of innocence and believing it was simply the hardened consciousness of guilt.

The two men below were fighting furiously, El Morte because he knew his own doom was sealed and would have liked very much to have had the satisfaction of sending the man he had wronged upon the long journey before him, and Duncan under the impulse given his passion by the startling disclosure made by the other.

On all sides the fight was raging furiously, and though the guerrillas had no possible chance of ultimate success, yet they seemed determined not to die without taking some of their enemies with them.

It could not last long, for the men of El Morte were many of them wounded, and it was only the desperation of blank despair that had maintained them up to this time. The blows of El Morte were met by the Shark-Slayer who had up to this time acted almost wholly upon the defensive.

Some of the other struggling combatants surged between them just at the moment when Duncan was ready to wind up the matter, and he was separated from his intended victim.

The guerrilla chieftain was quick to seize upon the opportunity thus afforded him. His evil face glowed with the light of a devilish scheme, which he intended putting into execution.

That this was something fearful was soon made manifest.

Snatching the torch from the place where it had rested all this while the stricken man reeled along the wall of the cave. In one corner lay an open keg, and toward this the bandit king was making his way.

"Won and lost, Duncan McGregor. When El Morte dies every soul of you will be flung into eternity with him. Hold your breath, fools, for you are on the brink. One last cheer for the Vultures of the pearl-coast, and then—"

The man-demon stood over the keg, and that open keg was filled to the brim with gunpowder!

CHAPTER XXX.

BLOTING OUT THE CRUEL PAST.

WOULD no one stop the madman?

Every arm seemed paralyzed with the shock. Guerrillas and pearl-divers alike halted in their deadly work, and all eyes were riveted upon the captain, as, with a fiendish laugh he swung the blazing torch to and fro over the powder-keg.

Every time it passed over Duncan drew a breath that was like a gasp. If even a spark were to fall it would be enough to blow them all into eternity.

El Morte seemed to enjoy this living death which he was inflicting upon all those there. As a cat plays with a mouse in its power, so he tantalizingly flaunted the torch to and fro, holding back the supreme moment until there should be some effort made to prevent his terrible act.

Was there no way to prevent the fearful tragedy?

Duncan held a revolver in his hand but dared not use it, for though stricken to the heart El Morte would with his last gasp drop the torch into the black contents of the keg, and thus triumph in his death.

No one was close enough to catch hold of him.

What agony was that? A second seemed a year, and not a man of those present but who cowered back with the horror that must come even to the bravest at such a time. Duncan himself let his arm fall—the revolver he grasped could not aid him there.

Great Heaven! was there no remedy? Must they meet such a terrible death in the midst of victory?

Something dropped beside the mad guerrilla chieftain. It was Don Pablo! Instantly the disguised woman seized with both hands the arm of El Morte which held the torch.

"I have heard all, villain, and with my life shall I thwart your devilish plans! You shall be foiled. Duncan has suffered enough—he shall live while you die."

Even while she was uttering these words the woman was being jerked violently from side to side as the man tried to free the arm she held on to like grim death.

"Let go, woman, let go!" he shouted with an oath; "let go, or your blood be on your head!"

He seemed to forget that if she did so, death was sure at any rate, as she must share in the common destruction he meant to bring upon them all, but the repentant Muriel did not cease to remember this.

Those who looked on saw a flash of steel and heard a scream of pain, but never for a second did the woman release her clasp.

Even Duncan himself was stunned for the moment, and could move neither hand nor foot to go to her assistance or, snatching away the torch, save all from the threatening death.

But one person moved. A lithe form darted through space, and Duncan looked down just in time to see Little Texas throw herself, not upon the tigerish brigand but over the open mouth of the powder-keg, completely closing it!

What with woman's bravery and woman's presence of mind they might yet be saved.

The reason of Duncan's standing there speechless while Don Pablo was struggling with the demon was that he was momentarily expecting to see the torch fall into the keg, in spite of the efforts made by the stricken woman to prevent it, and no sooner did he realize that this bright thought of the daring border girl effectually prevented such a catastrophe than his life and presence of mind came back.

By this time El Morte had succeeded, with a great burst of strength, in hurling Don Pablo away from him, and the woman fell upon the stone floor of

the cave, which was speedily crimsoned with her blood.

Uttering a fierce howl of delight El Morte turned to execute his fiendish design without further delay, when, to his intense amazement, he found the powder-keg covered with the form of Little Texas.

Heroic girl! love for Duncan had inspired her to do this deed, just as remorse had urged the woman who had been hurled away, dying, to put her own life in the balance, hoping that she might thereby undo the past.

With an oath the maniac guerrilla raised the torch on high, even while he seized hold of the girl and attempted to wrench away her hold. His *machete* was still plunged in the bosom of Don Pablo, so that he had no weapon save the torch.

Ere he could bring it down in a crushing blow upon that fair young head, Duncan fired three times in such rapid succession that the reports were blended into one.

Death came upon the guerrilla leader like a thunderbolt. He swayed for an instant, made one effort to steady himself, and then fell with a crash. There could be no mistaking the hollow sound of that fall—El Morte, the terror of the pearl coast was no more.

Another instant and Duncan had snatched up the torch, and thrust it once more into the crevice of the wall from whence it had been taken by El Morte.

The struggle went on.

Although the death of their leader had a bad effect on the guerrillas, still they were game to the last, being in a position where death was a surety at any rate, and as is well known the veriest poltroon can become desperate and wicked under such circumstances.

After replacing the torch Duncan gently lifted Little Texas who had not known all this while what was happening, and was momentarily expecting her death wound. She looked up into his face and uttered a glad cry.

"Saved! thank God, Duncan! Saved!"

The fight was over.

Four dark-browed and wounded men were prisoners; the rest lay silent in death. Even these fellows had not submitted to capture but had been overpowered.

Don Pablo's life was slowly ebbing. The murderous blade of El Morte had struck home, but it had been no more cruel than the blow he had dealt her in the past when he made her believe her husband false—nay worse, a villain of the deepest dye.

Duncan and Little Texas bent over the dying woman. Her head was pillowed in the lap of the brave border girl. This was Duncan's wife, and anything that belonged to him was sacred in the eyes of Little Texas whose love for the Shark-Slayer was adoration.

She had known he had a past, and that he would tell her of it some day, but she had forborne to question him seeing that it was filled with pain. This then was the secret he had held locked in his breast—the words of El Morte which he had calculated to lash the Shark-Slayer with, had taken all spot and blemish from the past life of Duncan.

That wife lay there dying. Whatever her faults may have been, no one could see her in such a condition and not have pardoned her for all the past. Duncan's heart was stirred by memories of olden days. He remembered how happy had been his life until the serpent had crept into his paradise and left a blackened trail behind him. This woman had once been all the world to him. True she was nothing now—had long ago forfeited all right to be called his wife, but he remembered that she had been hoodwinked by a cunning arch-demon who might have deceived Lucifer himself.

She put out one hand in a wavering, uncertain way.

Little Texas promptly placed it in that of Duncan.

"Forgive me, Duncan, for the past. I was basely deceived. See, when I learned the truth from that villain's lips I gave my life to save yours—for her you love. Oh God! let my life-blood wash out the sin of the past! 'Tis all I have and freely do I give it. Duncan—for—give—for—give!"

The soul was fast leaving its earthly tenement, and yet the eyes glowed with supernatural brightness as they fastened upon the handsome face of the Shark-Slayer. He bent down and pressed a kiss upon the cold lips. A tremor ran through the pain-racked frame, but it was of joy, not anguish.

"He forgives me! Oh, God! this is too good. It is sweet to die thus. I would not live now, even if I could. Duncan, my poor wronged husband, farewell!"

A sob broke from his breast, for he realized that but for the blighting influence of his cousin this poor dying creature might yet have been an honored, happy wife. When he raised his head she was dead. A smile of content hovered about her lips; in death she had found happiness.

During that day they buried the dead guerrillas, and on the horses captured in the sunken valley improvised litters upon which their own wounded were carried back to San Miguel. The dead, too, were taken so that they might be buried with the rites of the church.

When the astounding truth was known, a swift courier having brought the news, San Miguel went wild with joy, and the returning braves were met with ceremonies of the most elaborate kind. Never were the heroes of old greeted with wilder enthusiasm than they.

El Morte dead, and the Vulture gang destroyed!

The pearl coast could breathe more freely than it had been able to do for years. There were dozens of others connected with the Vultures, but with the loss of their leader they would be scattered to the four winds, and the chances were against any leader cropping up who could begin to take the place made vacant by the death of El Morte.

Duncan was the hero of the coast.

Once again the pearl-fisheries were in working-order. There were a number of vacancies in the ranks, for this good deed had not been accomplished without terrible loss. The dead were buried with imposing ceremonies, and it would be long indeed before they would be forgotten by the people of San Miguel.

Duncan had resigned his place to another.

The daring life no longer possessed a charm for him, for with the death of the two who were connected with his past had come a strong longing to visit

once more the scene of his earlier life, and live once more in civilization, amid its comforts and enjoyments.

He secured the treasures he had found in the tombs of the Montezumas. Besides the gold there were many precious stones inclosed in rich boxes, and altogether the amount represented in that load which the convoy took to the nearest railroad was ten times as much as they suspected, and enough to make Duncan a millionaire.

Before leaving San Miguel Duncan and Little Texas were wedded. The dear girl was the happiest soul in Lower California on the day that Duncan whispered in her ear with love in his voice the sweet word:

"Wife!"

She had loved him with heart and soul, and in her impulsive way would have given her life for him at any time had the opportunity arisen. Duncan had never believed he could love again, but the embers in his heart had been kindled into a new flame by the devotion of the border girl, and this last emotion grew even stronger than the first had been because bestowed upon a more worthy object.

He knew he could trust his life with Little Texas, for by that name he was wont to call her when alone, for it brought up the memories of the past which he could recall with a sense of intense satisfaction. In public she was known as Florence McGregor, and loved by all who knew her.

The mystery of her birth was never satisfactorily cleared up, though Duncan got some clues that led him to believe that she was the child of a couple who had been murdered by the Indians in Arizona, and that the old hunter who had been a foster-father to her, had found Little Texas, a babe almost in a deserted Indian camp.

To this day the name of Duncan the Shark-Slayer is remembered along the pearl coast, and when he and his family visited San Miguel a few years back they were received with much enthusiasm, and leaving, every pearl-diver found himself the richer by a valuable present.

They did not forget to visit the grave on the sunny slope looking out upon the grand ocean, where slept under the ever-blooming flowers poor Muriel, the erring woman who had with her life-blood washed out the sins of her past. After life's fitful fever she slept well.

THE END.

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